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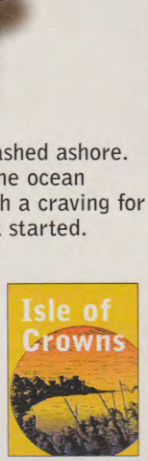

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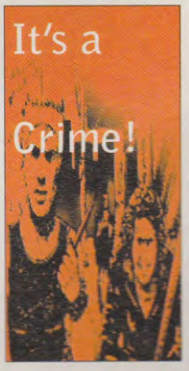

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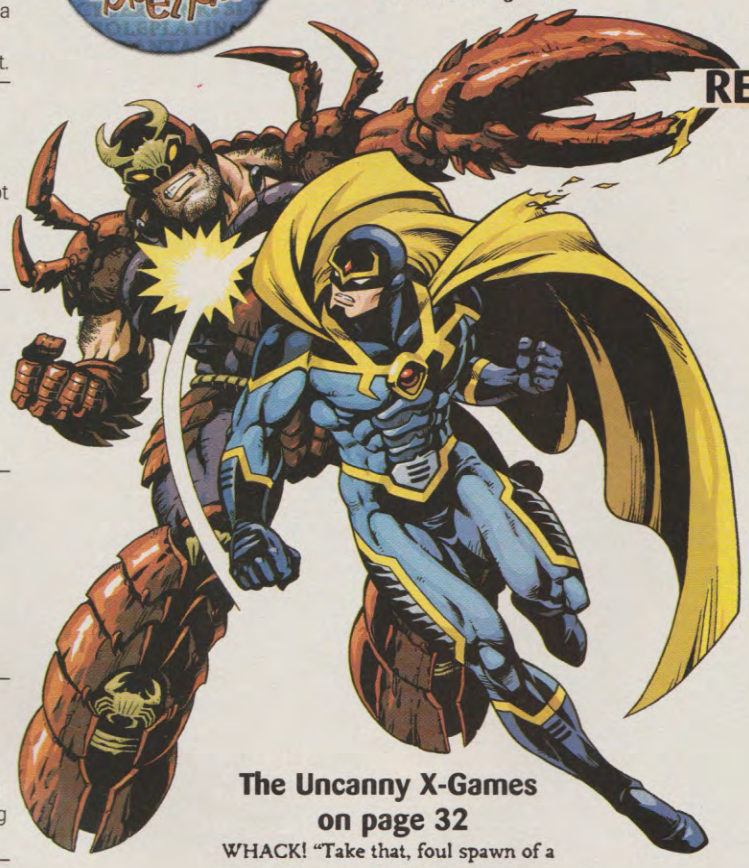

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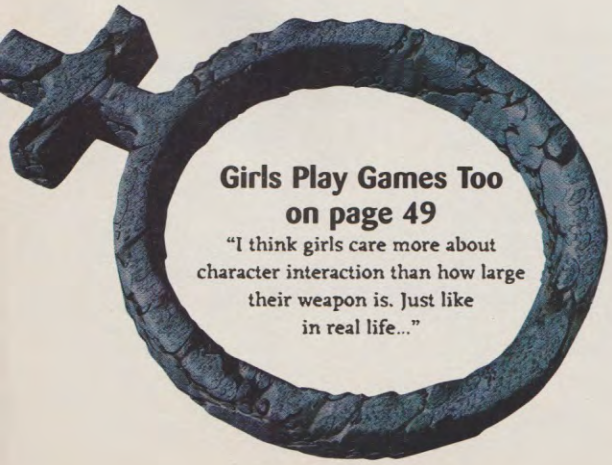

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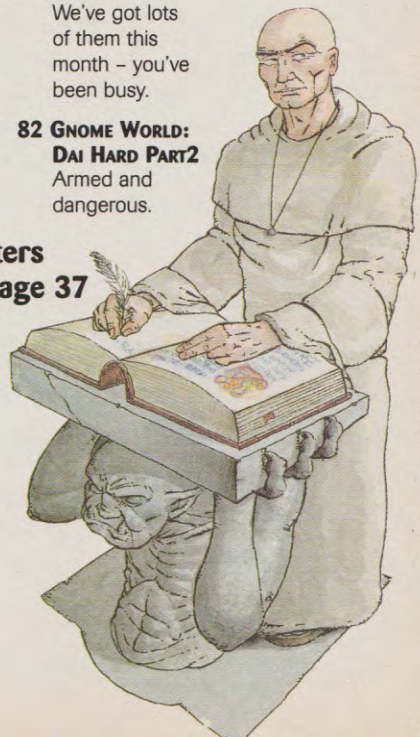

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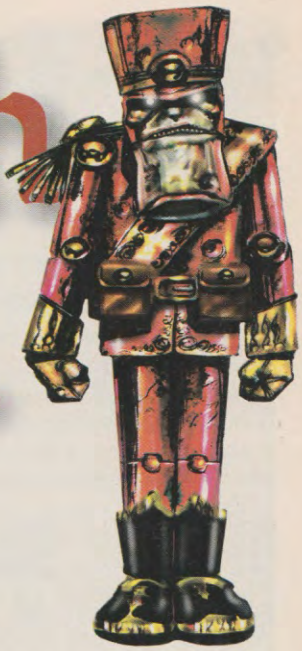
Childish things...



Puppetland? Don't knock anything until you've tried it.

"Cowboys and indians again then, is it?" My mate's elder brother was never that impressed with roleplaying, especially when he was turfed out of the room to make way for a game.

His scorn came from the fact that he thought what we were doing was a bit childish. Roleplaying? It's just 'let's pretend', isn't it? Well, yes, I suppose it is, but so what? Look around you. Lots of people are into roleplaying without acknowledging it.

LARP is the most popular form. The bloke who spends his Tuesday nights dressed in combat gear may call it 'being in the Territorial Army'. I call it playing war. I'm not knocking it. But let's get one thing straight: he isn't doing this to protect the nation, he's doing this because he likes running around with a gun pretending to shoot his mates. Which is what most of us did on the school playing field, aged six – stumbling theatrically forward toward the blazing machine gun nest, shouting 'I am *not* dead!' and 'One... last... grenade...'

When you get older this kind of 'let's pretend' is just as much fun, you simply want to cut out the arguments about who's dead and who's not. So you play paint ball. Or put dye on your foam rubber axe. Or play tabletop RPGs with defined rules. The parameters change, but the reason for doing it remains the same: it's fun. And if having fun is childish, then I don't ever want to grow up.

Then again, who does? Take that advertising executive tearing round a go-cart track during the 'corporate entertainment' part of his Very Important Business Meeting. He's in the lead, he's unstoppable... he is Damon Hill! And that little thing with a lawnmower engine is a Williams F1. It's a small step from there to a 25mm lead figure representing Hammerfast the dwarf. 'Let's pretend' isn't simply something you do or don't do, it's something everyone does in varying degrees.

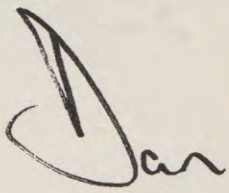
Maybe this all sounds like a justification spiel for what's often portrayed as a rather nerdy hobby. It's not. Well, not entirely. It is, in fact, a lead into this month's main feature: John Tynes' free roleplaying game, *Puppetland*.

Before I sat down and read this, I thought it was going to be a nightmare. Roleplaying puppets? I had visions of Rod Hull grappling with Matthew Corbett, blue feathers and yellow fur flying. It was all looking too... childish. What was I going to put on the cover? 'Free game about puppets'? I felt like a right muppet.

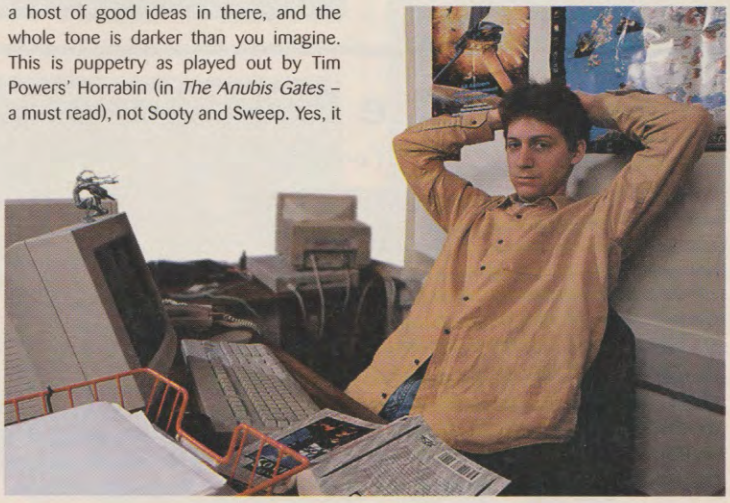
And then I read the article. There are a host of good ideas in there, and the whole tone is darker than you imagine. This is puppetry as played out by Tim Powers' Horrabin (in *The Anubis Gates* – a must read), not Sooty and Sweep. Yes, it does push the envelope of roleplaying potential further than most of us usually go, but that's no bad thing. As you'd say yourself to someone who looks down on roleplaying: 'don't knock it until you've tried it.' I think you'll be pleasantly (and maybe even unpleasantly) surprised.

Let me know, anyway. While we've got the results of the Readers' Poll we ran in issue 10 (see page 48), we still want to hear your opinions about anything and everything to do with **arcane**.

"The bloke who dresses in combat gear may call it 'being in the Territorial Army'. I call it playing war."



Dan Joyce, Editor



NEWS

News from around the roleplaying industry brought to you by **arcane**.

HEROIC ADVENTURES

• Blizzard Entertainment is due to release a computer RPG called *Diablo* – read about it on page 10.

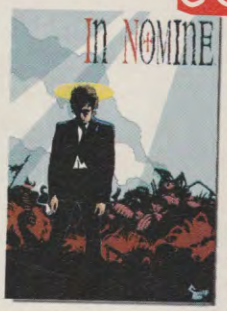
YOU CAN WIN...

• ...a copy of *Ars Magica 4th Edition* in our superb compo. Turn to page 13 to find out how.

In Nomine

At last! The latest roleplaying game from Steve Jackson Games is at the printers.

COMING SOON



After more delays and set-backs than British Rail during a signal operator's strike, Steve Jackson Games has finally announced that *In Nomine* is at last finished and has now been sent to the printers.

Originally announced nearly three and a half years ago, *In Nomine* is based on a French roleplaying game by the enigmatic Croc (yes, that's his name). Set in the modern world, it casts players as celestials – angels and demons – and pitches them into the eternal battle for control of humanity. The game has been plagued by delays ever since the start, with rumours abounding that at least one nearly complete version was rejected by Steve Jackson himself, prompting a complete rewrite of the whole system. After disappointing so many gamers eagerly awaiting the system, eventually the company gave up announcing release dates, and just said that 'it would be ready when it's ready'. And now, apparently, it is.

Just how good the finished game will be remains to be seen, of course, but it's almost certainly going to be the single best-looking roleplaying system ever released. The amount of preview artwork we've seen is simply staggering, and every single bit is just as good as the pieces we're showing you here.

In addition, now that work on the main rules has finished, an impressive line of supplements and sourcebooks is already planned, starting with a referee's screen and adventure, followed shortly afterwards by *Night Music*, which will flesh out the role of humanity in the 'Symphony', introduce more detailed character generation rules for certain character types, and feature more details on Laurence, Archangel of the Sword, and Saminga, Demon Prince of the Dead.

In Nomine should be available in the US by the end of January. Look out for a full review of the game in the next issue of **arcane** – and find out whether it's been worth the wait.

noir

Enter the dark and dangerous world of The Big City...

Take the 'film noir' movies of post-war America. Throw in the books of Raymond Chandler and Dashielle Hammet, and radio plays such as *Suspense* and *Lights Out!* Add a few graphic novels and comics such as *Sin City, Crime Suspense Stories* and *The Spirit.* Then stir them all together with the music of Tom Waits and Nick Cave, as well as the blues, big band and jazz.

What you end up with is the setting for *noir,* the first release from new RPG company Archon Gaming.

Based in a dark, unsettling world of corruption, double-crosses and

COMING SOON

Alternity

TSR announces a new sci-fi RPG system.

TSR has announced details of its new roleplaying system, *Alternity,* including a release schedule for the first books in the line.

Alternity is designed to allow almost any form of sci-fi roleplaying. Designers Bill Slavicsek (whose previous credits include books for *Star Wars, Tor,* and the *Dark Sun* and *Planescape* settings for *AD&D)* and Richard Baker (author of the *Birthright AD&D* setting and the *Player's Options AD&D* rules) say that the game will be fast and intuitive, and will use a skills-based system with a unified game

Star Trek: The Next Generation Collectible Dice Game

Pit the Borg against the Federation in the new dice game from Five Rings.

COMING SOON

The Five Rings Publishing Group is about to release its new collectable dice game based on the latest *Star Trek: The Next Generation* movie, which is called *First Contact.*

The Star Trek: The Next Generation Collectible Dice Game allows players to take control of the most popular and powerful starships of the *Star Trek: TNG* universe and throw them against each other in space combat. Each starter set for the game will feature a complete starship, containing everything you need to play.

Each ship in the game is represented by 25 dice unique to that design, which in turn represent the warp core, shields, weapons, damage control, reserve power, impulse drive and so on. Using a bridge/control panel card and 'ship shield' which explains all the relevant icons, players assign dice to different systems in an attempt to destroy their opponent.

According to Five Rings, the game takes about 30 minutes to play and is both simple to learn and yet flexible enough to provide a wide variety of tactical and strategic elements. Because this is the company responsible for the excellent *Legends of the Five Rings* collectable card game

COMING SOON

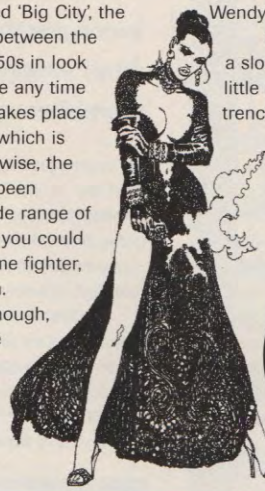
barely restrained violence, *noir* is a game about mystery, suspense and style. As night falls the city becomes a twisted, evil place, where dangerous secrets lurk in the shadows and no-one can be trusted – not even yourself. Players take on the roles of femme fatales, cops, mobsters, grifters, G-men and more, treading the thin line at the edge of the law. The kind of people that have never had an easy day in their lives, but keep on getting up in the morning out of sheer stubbornness and self-belief.

So far details of the game itself have been sketchy at best. The setting is a nebulous, undefined 'Big City', the time period anywhere between the 1920s and the early 1950s in look and style – but could be any time at all – and the game takes place shortly after 'The War', which is equally undefined. Likewise, the system seems to have been designed to allow a wide range of characters and goals – you could play a criminal or a crime fighter, or someone in between.

What is certain, though, is that the game will be very atmospheric, and the setting itself is literally overflowing with ideas for an enterprising referee.

What also bodes well is the list of contributors, which reads like a Who's Who of some of the most respected comic and gaming artists and writers in the world – Howard Chaykin, Matt Haley, Leif Jones, Ken Meyer Jr, Bill Sienkiewicz, Nancy Collins, Tim Toner, Wendy Lee and more all feature.

So, if you ever wanted to play a slouching private detective with little more than a rumpled trenchcoat, fedora and trusty .45 to his name, then *noir* may well be the game for you. Watch out for our exclusive review in the next issue of **arcane**.



mechanic to resolve all actions. The system will also be modular, allowing for different levels of complexity.

Alternity will follow the *AD&D* model, with the rules being released in a series of hardcover books. The first, the *Alternity Player's Handbook,* is due for release in July, and will include character generation rules, the basics of the system and combat, as well as details of weapons and equipment.

Following this in August will come the *Alternity Rulemaster Guide,* which will contain everything a ref needs, and in October *The Star•Drive Campaign Setting* book will be released, which will be the first of several planned campaign universes for *Alternity.*

We'll bring you more news and reviews when these books are released.

Traveller overload

Three new books for the classic sci-fi RPG.

Imperium Games is set to release the first three supplements for its new edition of *Traveller,* the far future science fiction roleplaying system – *Starships, Central Supply Catalogue* and the *Aliens Archive.*

The first, *Starships,* contains full game stats and notes on many of the most common spacecraft used at the start of the Third Imperium. Included are the early versions of many of *Traveller's* best-known ship classes. In addition, the book includes the Standard Ship Design System.

Central Supply Catalogue provides a list of equipment and personal weapons including everything from vac suits to first aid kits.

COMING SOON

Lastly comes the *Aliens Archive,* which presents 12 fully-detailed minor races.

Imperium is also finishing the next two supplements, *Milieu 0* and *First Survey.* We'll bring you news and reviews as the books are released.

(**arcane** 4), which more than lived up to expectations, chances are good that the *Star Trek: The Next Generation CDG* may well be as good as fans are hoping.

The initial release of the game will comprise two starter sets – the new Enterprise NCC-1701-E for the Federation and the Borg Sphere for the Collective – both of which made their initial appearances in the *First Contact* movie. Five Rings also plans to release a range of other starships from the *Star Trek* universe, including Klingon, Romulan and Ferengi vessels, as well as expansion sets which will add to the strategies available for each craft.

Look out for a review next month.

And besides...

TSR Web site on-line

After a long, long wait, TSR has finally decided to take the plunge on to the Internet, and has just opened its official World Wide Web site. Although only in its early stages, the site will be growing and expanding over coming months until it covers all of TSR's games and campaign worlds. To take a closer look, point your Web browser at: `http://www.tsrinc.com/`

1997 AD&D schools competition all set

One of the most positive – and often one of the most often overlooked – roleplaying events each year is the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* Schools Championship organised by TSR, which this year is being sponsored by computer games company Interplay. The competition involves schools all across the country, and as well as featuring loads of great prizes – including a trip to the USA for the entire winning team and their parents – serves to educate both teachers and parents about our hobby.

If you're interested in getting your school involved (or your childrens' school, for that matter), call TSR on 01223 2125127.

The RPGA wants sci-fi

The science fiction co-ordinator for the UK branch of the Role Playing Games Association is looking for material for the RPGA World Wide Web pages. Reviews, news, opinion, suggestions, links to good sci-fi sites and pretty much anything else you think might be of interest is needed – as long as it's about science fiction, and preferably has something to do with gaming. The only things that aren't required at present are artwork, fiction or full scenarios, although this may change as the pages develop. Full credit will be given to contributors, so if you have any ideas, e-mail them to `rpga@reality-x.reality-x.co.uk`

Daedalus Web site on the move

Fans of the *Feng Shui* roleplaying system or the *Shadowfist* collectable card game – two of our favourite game systems here at **arcane** – with Internet access should update their bookmarks, because the company's official World Wide Web site has moved. The new site features details of upcoming releases, errata for all the games, and much more. Take a look at `http://www.shadowfist.com/ndoster/`

Diablo

Enter a world ravaged by evil in Blizzard's new computer roleplaying game.

COMING SOON

The company behind the excellent *Warcraft II* fantasy strategy game, Blizzard Entertainment, is due to release its first computer roleplaying game for the PC, which is to be called *Diablo*.

The game casts you as a proud hero drawn by tales of a powerful evil that has decimated a once peaceful community. On travelling to the village you learn that the local church, once a centre for good, has been corrupted and overrun by dark powers. The catacombs beneath the building are now seething with terrifying monsters of all types, and if they cannot be stopped, the unfortunate surviving locals will be driven from their homes and livelihoods.

Of course, being a hero, you volunteer for the job of sorting things out. To save the town you have to complete a number of quests, each of which requires you to work your way deeper into the maze of subterranean passages. Eventually you must face and kill Diablo himself, the cause of all the ills that have befallen the surrounding lands.

Diablo features three characters to choose from – warrior, mage and rogue – each of which requires a different approach to the game. In addition, the various levels and quests are randomly generated at the start of every new game, making for a different challenge every time. From what we've seen so far, *Diablo* promises to be one of the best-looking computer games in some time. For a full review, see next month's **arcane**.

Fallout:

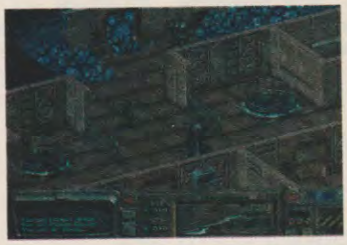
A GURPS Post-Nuclear Adventure

Work continues on the first ever *GURPS* computer game.

COMING SOON

Computer gaming company Interplay is continuing to develop the first computer game based on Steve Jackson Games' *GURPS* roleplaying system.

Fallout is the first in a planned series of *GURPS* computer games, all of which will use a highly developed game engine based on the *GURPS* rules. The game is set in a future where the world has been devastated by a nuclear exchange. Your character is the descendant of some of the lucky few who made it to one of the VAULT bomb shelters, where the survivors have lived for over 80 years. Although some have left to explore the outside world, none have returned.



Now, however, the water purification system in your home, VAULT 13, has broken down, and can't be repaired. The only hope for the community is for someone to venture out and find another surviving VAULT, which may have the spare components needed. Guess who gets the job?

"We picked the post-nuclear, survivalist genre because *GURPS* handles aspects of this type of game well," says lead developer Tim Cain. "We also like big guns and mutants."

The Marvel Collectable Dice Game

TSR brings some of the world's most popular comic characters to the gaming table.

As reported last year in **arcane**, TSR is due to release its second collectable dice game, based on the heroes and villains of Marvel Comics' vast range of popular titles. The game is now complete and, providing there are no problems with the production of the dice themselves, it should be released in February.

Although details of the game itself are still being closely guarded by TSR, the company claims that this is a very different game from the top-selling *Dragon Dice*, which started the whole collectable dice game genre.

What is certain is that players will be able to pit teams of their favourite Marvel characters against each other in typically over-the-top Marvel battles. From what we have seen, it certainly seems like a lot of fun, and TSR claims that it's fast-paced and easy to learn. The dice themselves also seem to be up to the high standards set by *Dragon Dice*, and are suitably colourful.

TSR already has a number of expansion sets planned, each covering a different comic or group of Marvel titles, such as the *X-Men*, the *Fantastic Four* and the *Avengers*. In addition there's a specially designed 'starter set' planned, similar to the *Dragon Dice Battlebox*, which TSR plans to sell in comics shops across the US and Europe.

We'll bring you a full review of the *Marvel Collectable Dice Game* as soon as it's released, and more news about the expansion sets will appear in coming issues.

OXFORD DIPLOMACY
Tournament/*Settlers of Catan* Tournament
Saturday 1st February
Arco Building, Keble College, Parks Road, Oxford
Diplomacy £2.50, Settlers £1
For more information contact **Mark Stretch**
☎ **01865 842734**

NEWARK IRREGULARS FANTASY AND SCI-FI PARTIZAN
Sunday 16th February
10am-4pm
Kelham Hall on the A617 Mansfield Road out of Newark
Independent fantasy and sci-fi tabletop miniature wargames show, featuring Alternative Armies, Awesome Enterprises, Games Workshop, Harlequin Miniatures, Stratagem, Rank and File Miniatures, TSR Miniatures and others.
Contact **Laurence Baldwin**, 44 Hallam Road, Mapperley, Nottingham NG3 6HR
☎ **0115 952 1966**
http://www.soton.ac.uk/~drb2/irregulars.html

TAGCON
Saturday 22nd February
Nuneaton Arts Centre
7th Annual Science Fiction Live Roleplaying Convention
£7 (£8 on the door). Price includes buffet lunch. Bar will be available.
Contact **Dai Rees**, 122 Hartland Avenue, Wyken, Coventry, West Midlands, CV2 3ES.
☎ **01203 453673**

DARK HORIZONS SCIENCE FICTION LARP 1997 Calendar
Feb 28th-March 1st/2nd
Squirrel Wood, Doncaster
Become a member of the 5th Company of the Colonial Marine corps in a campaign set 500 years into the future.
£55, includes hot meals, accommodation and equipment.
Contact **Tony Gill**, Dark Horizons SFLARP, 25 St John's Road, Harrogate, North Yorks HG1 3AF
Phone/Fax **01423 568407**
E-mail: Tony@drkhrzns.demon.co.uk
http://www.drkhrzns.demon.co.uk/index.html

LEPRECON XVIII
March 1st-2nd
Trinity College, Dublin
There will be guests, competitions, special events and insane amounts of beer at the pub quiz and convention party.
Contact **Dublin University Gamers Society, Box 18, Regent House, Trinity College, Dublin,** bgamers@maths.tcd.ie

CHEESECON
April 5th-6th
RGU Student's Union, Schoolhill, Aberdeen AB1 1JQ
WotC-hosted *M:TG* events, LRPs including *Vampire*, RPGs and other tourneys. Special guest – Dave Allsop (creator of *SLA Industries* and *Reverie*). Charity auction!
Contact the above address or phone **Nathan** on
☎ **01224 584590**
You cam also e-mail us at gnl.mi96.student.eee.rgu.ac.uk@eee-student.eee.rgu.ac.uk

Look out for lots more conventions listed in next month's issue.

Cain also claims that the game will be true to the *GURPS* rules. "We are going to include all skills, advantages and disadvantages that make a difference in the game. This is pretty much the way a normal, tabletop version would be run by a competent GM."

Fallout will be played in a 3D isometric view, and the bulk of the game will be played in real time, with a turn-based combat system. Unlike many computer RPGs, the player will have a lot of control. As you explore the wastes of southern California you will discover locations and a variety of subplots, but which of these you choose to complete is up to the player.

Fallout is looking like one of the most ambitious computer RPGs ever. Interplay intends to release it this summer, so look out for a review then.

Seymour J clancy

The tarmacking of our island is a worrying matter, but Seymour has other concerns on his so-called mind...

Ah have intercepted an e-mail missive. It was commuted from an **arcane** reader called Vickie and contained informayshun of a misleading naycher concerning the antics of her say-elf and her co-horse.

She was implaaying that the Poe-Lease were implicated in 'Laugh Achtung Roleplaying', reefering for her questionable heavy-dense to an episode of *The Thin Blue Lawn* as shown on the naahnteenth of December and in witch one of the characters was called 'Elf'. Ah can only giss that Ms 3232@aol.com misheard the pronunciayshun of the name 'Alf'.

She claims that Rowan Atkinson was being a tree wahl a colleague sat upon his soldiers pretending to be a road protester, so they could snick up on the protest rally. However, Rowan Atkinson is, in achsul fact, not an actor but a speed-cheese of the genus 'sorbets Americana', a real kahnd of tree which is nay-tive to America and made out of ice and fruity flavourings.

Anyway, elves are not exclusive to *Advanced Dessicated Dustbins*, they are common pests. Mischievous varmints.

WIN a set of Marvel Collector's Comics

In this month's Media section (see page 76) we take a look at *Wolverine Unleashed*, one of three titles in the Collector's Edition Series which also includes *Astonishing Spiderman* and *Essential X-Men*. As you can tell, we rather liked it, and the other two titles are just as impressive. So, if you're a comics fan you'll be pleased to hear that we've got no less than ten sets of all three comics to give away, courtesy of the jolly nice people at Marvel. To win one of the ten sets, all you have to do is answer the following question...

Wolverine's skeleton and claws are coated with a nearly unbreakable metal. What's it called?

Mark your answer 'Who you calling shorty, bub?' and send it on a postcard or e-mail it to us at the following addresses:

arcane,
Future Publishing Ltd,
30 Monmouth Street,
Bath,
Avon,
BA1 2BW

arcane@futurenet.co.uk

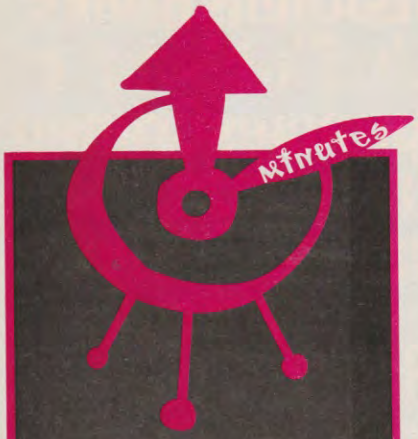
Da rules o' the game

1. The closing date for entries is Friday 7th March. Any received after that date will be shredded in a Wolverine-esque manner.
2. Employees of Future Publishing and Marvel Comics are not allowed to enter, even if they really, really want to. Any trying it will be shredded in a Wolverine-esque manner.
3. Only one entry per person, please. We've asked nicely, so we'll feel no compunction at snatching up multiple entries and shredding them in... well, you get the idea.
4. The editor's decision is, amongst other things, final. There's no shredding involved here, that's just the way it is.

AgonyAuntsAliensBooks BoozeCelebsClubbingComics ConspiraciesCrimeDinosaursDreamsDrugsErotica EzinesFoodFootyFunnies GadgetsGamesGhosts HealthHistoryInterviews KidsKooksMonstersMovies NatureNewsPolitics PhilosophyRadioRetroScience SexSharewareSociety SportTastelessTelevision ToolsTriviaUselessVideoGames WebgamesWebsoaps Weirdos We could go on, you know...

If you're navigating the Information Supermotorway, the last thing you want to do is get lost. With well-over 600 BRAND NEW sites reviewed and rated every issue, there really is only one A-to-Z guaranteed to point you in the right direction.

If it ain't in The .net Directory it ain't worth seeing.



Famous for 15 Minutes

Ian McKie from York reckoned he must have been the hundredth person to write in to 'Famous for 15 Minutes' about the very last episode of *Only Fools and Horses*. He wasn't.

John Wood@cbtsys.com thought we would probably have heard from at least 1,000 people by the time his last minute e-mail came through to arcane@futurenet.co.uk He, too, wildly over-estimated the actual response figure.

Normally, we would expect several hundred thousand readers to bear witness to a roleplaying reference on one of the most popular television programmes of all time. As it turned out however, Catherine Hope and Mik Towse, who are both from the same part of Huddersfield, were the only other people in the country sober and awake enough on Sunday 29th December to witness the scene with Del and Rodders stuck in a lift.

Rodders was complaining that life with his wife had changed from being a game of Happy Families into a game of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Catherine's letter comments that she'd rather have the latter, and we're sure many of our readers would agree with her, but Rodney is none too happy about it. As usual. Daft plonker.

Or maybe not. His scriptwriters used TSR's game as a comical device and 24 million Britons watched, which is two million more than saw the *Panorama* interview with Princess Diana. Presumably this discrepancy in the viewing figures can be explained by **arcane** readers choosing to play games that night, secure in the belief that there would be nothing to report to us because Diana, even if she babbled on all night, wouldn't mention the hobby at all. Which she didn't. We're told. By our parents.

Write to **15 Minutes, arcane, 30 Monmouth St, Bath BA1 2BW**
Or e-mail us at:
arcane@futurenet.co.uk if she does.
And we'll find you a present.

Chaosium has a busy new year

Two new books for *Call of Cthulhu* and a *Pendragon* supplement on the way...

Chaosium is preparing to start 1997 with three new books, two for *Call of Cthulhu* and one for *Pendragon*.

The first of the *Cthulhu* releases will be a mini-campaign for the 1990s time period called *A Resection of Time*. Set in the US and Central America, the adventure faces players with the mystery surrounding the death of the successful archaeologist, Kyle Woodson. At first his demise seems to be nothing more than a car accident. But when the players discover some medical irregularities and the body is quickly cremated, the case takes on unsettling dimensions. A 64-page book, *A Resection of Time* is designed to be played over three sessions, and will have an array of player handouts.

Next on the *Cthulhu* schedule is *Dreamlands Fourth Edition*, a new and revised version of this sourcebook covering the world first created by Lovecraft. This edition will contain over 100 pages of new material, drawing gods, creatures, spells, artifacts and characters from the stories of Carter, Lumley and others.

For *Pendragon* comes *Lordly Domains*, a sourcebook covering the life of a noble in the feudal system of Arthurian times. *Lordly Domains* examines a noble's day to day life, including rules for owning and maintaining lands, hunting, hawking, tournaments, feasts and even a section on heraldry.

A Resection of Time and *Lordly Domains* are both due to be released in February, with *Dreamlands Fourth Edition* due in late March or April.

Birthright:

The Gorgon's Alliance

The first *Birthright* computer game is very nearly finished.

After a couple of years in which it seemed that the computer roleplaying game was dying, the genre has bounced back again, and 1997 is packed with upcoming releases. From Sierra comes the first computer game based on the *AD&D Birthright* setting, which casts players as rulers of entire kingdoms, struggling for control of the continent of Cerilia.

This setting's mixture of strategy, management and roleplaying seems almost tailor made for a computer game, and *The Gorgon's Alliance* is the first in a planned series of games based on *Birthright*.

The game casts you as the ruler of a small kingdom beset by dangers and difficulties, but also faced with great opportunities. Through diplomacy, exploration, adventure and mass warfare, you must consolidate your position, making use of your character's class and unique Blood Abilities – the birthright of your noble lineage – and defeat a powerful evil that threatens the world. The evil isn't very original, but the format and presentation of the game look interesting.

The early screenshots are promising, and if the gameplay lives up to its looks, *Birthright: The Gorgon's Alliance* may end up being a must for any fan of *AD&D*. **arcane** will have a full review soon.

The truth is out... Ooops

Many apologies to Hobby Games, because last issue we quoted Esdevium Games as being the contact for those of you who want to get hold of *The X-Files* collectable card game. Hobby Games has pointed out to us that it is the UK official distributor for this product, not Esdevium. Call Hobby Games on ☎ 01903 730998.

WIN a copy of Battle Rage

The first release from UK games company Goblin Games, *Battle Rage* is a neat little fantasy wargame system that, for a first release, has a lot of promise despite a few weaknesses (see reviews this issue). To celebrate the game's release, Goblin Games has very kindly given us two copies of *Battle Rage* to give away to you lot. All you have to do is answer this question, and one of them could be yours...

Name three other 'goblinoid' races popular in many fantasy roleplaying games, besides goblins themselves.

Mark your entry 'I'm feeling small, green, and mean' and send or e-mail it to us at the following addresses:

arcane,
Future Publishing Ltd,
30 Monmouth Street,
Bath, Avon BA1 2BW,
England
arcane@futurenet.co.uk

Rules – ya gotta have a few

1. The closing date is Friday 7th March.
2. Employees of Future Publishing and Goblin Games are not allowed to enter, so tough.
3. Only one entry per person, please. And no sneaky stuff.
4. The editor's decision is, as always, final. That's why he's the ed.

WIN a copy of Ars Magica 4th Edition

The classic game of medieval magic is back – and we've got ten copies to give away.

In the last issue of **arcane** we reviewed the latest edition of *Ars Magica*, one of the most highly-regarded fantasy games of all time, thought by many to have the best magic system of any roleplaying game. The good news is that Atlas Games' new version of the system was the best yet, and the game was awarded not only a whopping 9/10 mark, but the coveted **arcane** Seal of Approval into the bargain.

To celebrate the release of the game, Atlas Games has kindly donated us ten brand new and jolly shiny copies of the rulebook to do with as we see fit. Much as we were tempted to keep them for ourselves, a sudden attack of charity overcame us, and we decided to let you, our readers, have them.

Luckily for us, we have significantly more than ten readers, but this poses a bit of a problem. Rather than simply pick names out of a hat (which would be a bit haphazard, because we don't actually know all your names), we hit upon yet another excellent idea. We'll run a competition, and then pick ten correct answers out of a hat. Clever stuff, eh?

Anyway, let's get on with it. To become the proud owner of a copy of this excellent roleplaying game, simply answer the following question...

arcane COMPO

Player characters in Ars Magica *are assumed to belong to a specific order of magicians. What is its name?*

Simply mark your entry 'Why do all of **arcane**'s competitions have such silly names, eh?' and send or e-mail it to the **arcane** office at:

arcane,
Future Publishing Ltd,
30 Monmouth Street,
Bath,
Avon,
BA1 2BW,
England

arcane@futurenet.co.uk

THE LAWS OF MAGIC ARE IMMUTABLE. AND OURS ARE TOO.

1. The closing date for entries is Friday 7th March.
2. Employees of Future Publishing and Atlas Games are forbidden from entering. Finely-crafted detection enchantments will automatically inform us of an attempt, and a number of long-range and unpleasant spells will be sent zipping through the ether to curse the transgressor for all eternity.
3. Only one entry per person is allowed. The very same detection spells will also spot anyone trying to enter more, and even nastier curses will result. You have been warned.
4. In the magical world of *Ars Magica*, the editor would have been an Archmage of indescribable power. As it is, his decision is just as final.

COMPO RESULTS

SETTLERS OF CATAN
The ten winners are: William Humphries of Ardrossan, Debbie Kirk of Clacton-on-Sea, Pekka Korolainen of Järvenpää, Bridgit Mulrooney of Winchester, Jordi Puig of Girona, Darren Richards of Bridgend, Emma Stewart of Paignton, Maurits Westerik of Rotterdam, Ian Wood of Newton Abbot and Jon Wright of Southampton. These six runners-up win a copy of *Chill* complete with the *Vampires* and *Veil of Flesh* supplements: David Bergkvist of Själevad, Andrew Burbridge of Milton Keynes, Myles Corcoran of Paris, David Howarth of Shipley, Stephen Jackman of Hitchin and Russell Strong of Maidstone.

DON'T FORGET YOUR TORCH
One boxed set of 20th Century Home Entertainment videos comprising the entire first series of *The X-Files* goes to Pete Butcher of Ealing. The following ten runners-up win a copy of *File 6 – Master Plan*, the latest in the series of *X-Files* videos: Vanessa Alwin of Portsmouth, William Branch of Nottingham, Hywel Cross of Holyhead, Mike Hughes of Barnsley, Kelly McGuire of Liverpool, Linda Price of Gloucester, James Stuart of Edinburgh, Michael Wood of Bury, Shelley Wood of Barry and Steve Yeo of Taunton.

AD&D STARTER SETS
Ten copies of the abridged versions of *The Player's Manual*, *The Dungeon Master's Guide* and *The Monstrous Compendium* go to: Baljit Chimu of Nuneaton, Michael Didymus of Southampton, Kenneth Goodwin of Tullamore, Tim Hewitt of Ashby-de-la-Launde, Mikael Johansson of Göteborg, Deborah Pate of Bristol, Graham Priddle of Cardiff, Steve Pugh of Dorking, Matthew Reid of Glasgow and Marzio Spairani of Genova.

GIMME MIRAGE, MAN
One display of 12 *Mirage* starter packs and one display of 36 *Mirage* booster packs goes to Alistair Milnes of Edinburgh, who sent us a postcard with a mirror on it, which was quite interesting in an ironic kind of way. Runners-up Patrick Buckley of Kilkenny, Gemma Frost of Peterborough, Emma King of Coventry, James Weale of Belfast and Paul Wernham of Invergordon each receive one display of 36 *Mirage* booster packs. And there's a *Mirage* T-shirt each for bronze medalists James Cartwright of Alford, Nicola Clarke of Oldham, Jarmo Hämäläinen of Laukaa, Luiz Hofmann of Berlin, Penny Houghton of Sutton, Benjamin Maugendre of Poole, Ian Miles of Banbury, Susan Roberts of Bristol, Damon Warr of Douglas, and Daniel Wright of Pontypridd.

I'M GLAD YOU ASKED ME THAT
Hardback copies of Vera Chapman's *The Three Damosels* and paperbacks of Mike Ashley's *Chronicles of the Holy Grail* go to Richard Aitken of Aberdeen, Mark Alman of Milton Abbas, Sarah Anderson of Leicester, Richard Appleby of Matlock, Rob Barrett of Leamington Spa, Phil Nicholls of Gorleston, Paal Are Nordal of Ulset, Steve Taylor of East Dereham, D Walker of Liverpool and Tom Wright of York. Congratulations!

next month in arcane

STOP!

DON'T LET YOUR PLAYERS GET AWAY WITH MURDER

WANTED: Cimmerian barbarian on 1,453 counts of murder one, 7,865 counts of murder in the second degree, and numerous other felonies. Phil Masters explains how and why to lay down the law in your campaign, and the benefits it brings.

NOW THAT'S MAGIC

Bored of playing the same old decks against the same old mates? Set up a local league or tournament and play *Magic* as it's meant to be played. We show you how.

CHIVALRY AND SORCERY IS BACK!

Twenty years ago it was hailed as the most realistic medieval roleplaying game, with copious background notes and exhaustive rules, charts and tables. But can a rules-laden system still cut it in the '90s?

PLUS!

One of our biggest reviews section ever, including a world exclusive of *Cthulhu* campaign book *Delta Green*, the re-release of *Masks of Nyarlathotep* and *Star Trek: First Contact*, the collectable dice game.

arcane 17 will be on sale on Friday 28th February

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A long, long time ago...

once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.

ANDREW RILSTONE

Andrew is the editor of *Interactive Fantasy*, the journal of roleplaying and story-making systems, and is also a regular contributor to arcane.

I AM EXTREMELY CROSS with George Lucas.

Don't get me wrong. I'm glad that the *Star Wars* movies are going to be revived on the big screen. I'm keen to see that missing scene where Jabba the Hutt meets Han Solo. I am even intrigued to see the rejigged special effects, although I reserve the right to say, "Cut out all the improvements." And, of course, it's great that all those cool toys that I didn't have the pocket money to buy the first time around are back in the shops. But does Mr Lucas really have to keep reminding me, in every single press release and every single preview, that it's now 20 years (yes, *20 years)* since the films first came out?

George, George – you are making me feel old.

You are also reminding me that it is now 20 years since I started playing RPGs. In fact, the two events – *Star Wars* and my first experiences of roleplaying – are inextricably linked in my mind.

Who was it who said that the Golden Age of science fiction was 'about 12'? That's how old I was when *Star Wars* (I still can't bring myself to call it 'A New Hope') first came out. It was, as my mother will happily tell you, the only thing I talked about for a period of six months.

Why was the film such a big deal? The reviewers in the papers at the time all went on about the wonderful special effects. This has always seemed to me to completely miss the point, and it's one reason why I am slightly underwhelmed by the idea of the semi-remake. Effects are definitely not what *Star Wars* was all about. Hell, if all I wanted was to see huge spaceships exploding, I could watch *Thunderbirds* instead.

No, it was the whole atmosphere – the desert, the jawas, the blue milk, the jungle, the hints about the Jedi knights – that made the film so awe-inspiring. The sense of a huge universe, with nine-tenths of it hidden, off screen, just out of range of the camera. Only *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dark Crystal* (yes, I know I'm the only person on Earth who liked that film) have ever given me that same sense of looking out of this world into another one.

As I sat watching the film for the eighth or ninth time, I would have given anything to have been able, like Mia Farrow, to step through the screen on to Luke's farm, or into the Mos Eisley Cantina (I was still too young to go into pubs), or (best of all) into Alec Guiness' cave in the desert. I don't want to go to school tomorrow. I want to learn the ways of the Force and come with you to Alderaan.

"Very few games have given me the thrill of those first adolescent sessions of *Traveller*."

When I stumbled, by accident, on a copy of a new American game called *Dungeons & Dragons* it seemed as if it might be the answer to my prayers. In this game, it was promised, you don't simply read about fantasy heroes – you can actually become one.

Of course, I had to wait another ten years before there was an 'official' *Star Wars* RPG. I would have sold my grandmother for something like *X-Wing* or *Dark Forces*. Fortunately for the old girl, back then, even *Space Invaders* was a new and arcane concept. Bill Gates had not yet been invented. But that didn't stop me from jury-rigging first edition *Traveller* into a pseudo *Star Wars* universe. And when it comes down to it, mystical Clerics or Paladins with magic swords are not too removed from Jedi Knights. I gradually came to terms with the fact that I was never going to find a wardrobe or a police box capable of dragging me out of north London and dumping me in the middle of the Jundland wastes. Roleplaying games were the next best thing.

And this leaves me with a terrible dilemma...

I believe that roleplaying games can be a sophisticated adult pastime. The games I have most enjoyed in recent years have been those in which deeply committed players experienced moral dilemmas and emotional crises, which reflected issues that the players and the referee really cared about. I applaud the sections of White Wolf's *World of Darkness* series which tell players to use the games to explore difficult, painful, important subjects such as evil, death and children. I agree with the books that tell referees to use complex narrative tools such as flashbacks and symbolism in their games. I have run many experimental games, and sometimes even dared to hope that some of them might deserve to be called Works of Art.

And yet – if I am completely honest with myself – very few of the excellent games I have played have given me anything like the thrill of those first, faltering, adolescent sessions of *Traveller* and *D&D*. I hate to admit it, but none of my 'adult' games have created quite the same feeling – the feeling that you have left East Barnet Comprehensive far behind, and really are slap-bang in the middle of an exciting and adventurous fantasy story.

Some people will undoubtedly say, 'Well, then, that proves it. You have made your sessions too sophisticated, and spoiled the fun.' I don't believe this. It would be silly to try to run a naive, simplistic game with out-of-date rules, and pretend that it could recreate the thrill of my first ever dungeon-bash. It wouldn't.

I know that the games I run now are far better than the ones I ran when I was 12 years old. Just as I know, in my heart of hearts, that *Star Wars: The Special Edition* will be – by every sensible criteria of film-making – a far better movie than the original version. I am also pretty sure I won't enjoy it as much. Of course, the very fact that I am thinking about this dilemma is probably proof of oncoming middle age and approaching senility.

Thank you George, thank you so very much.

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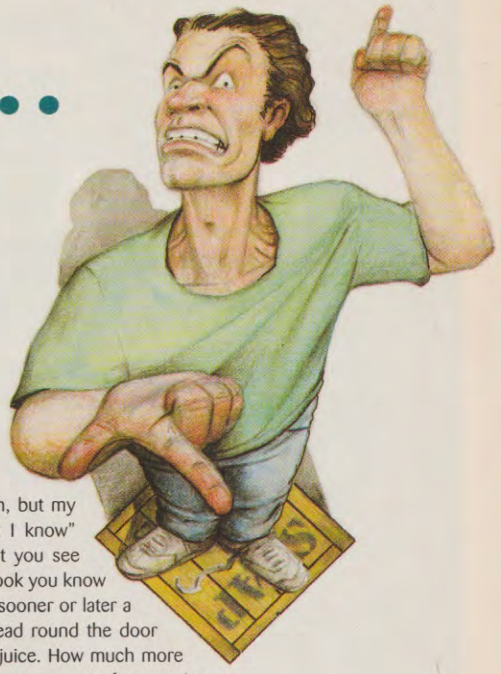

This month Jean-Paul Bourdais rejects the amateur psychology of the horror genre in favour of the classic 'good vs evil' approach to roleplaying.

IT WAS A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT and the referee said to his players, "Gather round, friends, and I'll tell you a story." And the story began... Sound familiar? Okay, so maybe the night isn't always so dark and stormy, but from the moment you hear those immortal words uttered in a macabre tone that would make even Vincent Price's flesh crawl, you know you're in for a Hell of an evening.

The air seems oppressive and threatening, and even the fridge door creaks a little too much when you dive in for a drink a couple of hours later. You swear that the ref's eyes alight with a deviant passion as he recounts to you tales of bloodied corpses and grotesque denizens, intent on hacking you limb from limb. Your brain twists and contorts to keep up with your vivid imagination. You explore the dark recesses of your character's mind in an attempt to exorcise the demons as you feel your sanity ebbing away...

What it boils down to is that it's all gone horribly pear-shaped. Now this may be a fine example of the fun to be had being scared witless (and don't get me wrong, there is much) but losing another character to the inevitable sanity roll really makes you wonder why your Journalist ever left the comfort of his cosy apartment. Of course, in the case of *Vampire* or *Werewolf*, you may actually find yourself doing an Anne Rice as a tortuous soul scavenging the streets for a morsel of flesh. This is all well and good, but there are only so many times you can play the tragic and the damned and, let's be honest now, it all comes down to who's got the biggest claws anyway.

Some would argue that I just haven't been to the right parties, but I find that the genre of horror roleplaying has fallen into a cliché that renders all but the best gaming groups' efforts tired and samey. It wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the upsurge of 'character' roleplaying. Many systems encourage work on 'soul-searching' and it is true that fear and adversity provide good tools for fleshing out a character, but in the end the PCs should triumph over themselves and move on to other, immediate threats. I've attended a game where the players delighted so much in being dark and mysterious that they wouldn't actually interact with anything. I optimistically munched on my biscuits in the hope that something would change, but alas, by the end of the session everyone was reduced to gibbering vegetables. Well, at least the conversations became more interesting!

Yeah, you're probably thinking that I'm the one who lost my sanity roll, but at the end of the day there are plenty of other ways to run games that build characters in less predictable and more varied ways. You can use the old "ah, but my character doesn't know what I know" excuse, but from the moment you see the ghoulish face on the rulebook you know in the back of your mind that sooner or later a demon is going to pop his head round the door and fry your intestines in yak juice. How much more effective would it be if there was no forewarning whatsoever? There you are, in the middle of a warehouse opening crates to find hard evidence of the drug operation your brother died to protect, and suddenly a demon pops his head round the door to fry your intestines in yak juice. Okay, it sounds silly, but if it's done properly and actually tied in with the campaign it can be damn disconcerting to find that the game you thought you'd been playing was actually *Demon: The Slithering* in disguise.

There's absolutely no reason why there should be any moral dilemma whatsoever. You would expect demons to be pretty nasty, after all. I can guarantee that however vile a person you choose to play, if they're human they'll be models of charity and goodwill compared with Lucifer and his minions. So, where's the problem? Good versus evil. Timeless stuff. If you need character development, you have it right there. After all, actions speak louder than words. Though certainly possible, it's difficult to face your demons in a roleplaying context if a) they only exist in your mind or b) your character happens to be of such a dark nature that they cease to be demons and become assets. There's something inherently satisfying about actually being able to kill something really despicable. They don't all have to be invulnerable and/or so much like you that you get confused and start chewing on cardboard.

"Yet another *AD&D* power-gamer" I hear you cry. Not so. There's room enough for intrigue and development elsewhere in the game, but often you need something tangible to focus all your anger on, something that makes you want to win. The enemy may not be clear at first, but it should become clear in time, or you end up wondering just why you devoted so much time to a hero who ultimately doesn't know what they're doing in the local Gothic library at midnight on a Thursday.

I actually love horror games and the horror genre, but it has become too much like armchair psychology and less to do with the battle against fear and evil forces. It may work in novels but roleplaying has as much to do with action as it has introspection, and you certainly can't find Freud on my bedside table.

"Roleplaying has as much to do with action as introspection, and you certainly can't find Freud on my bedside table."

BE AFRAID... Another source of inspiration is *The BFI Companion to Horror* (published by Cassell), which we reviewed in last issue's Great Library. While the emphasis is on films, there is a section on gaming and plenty of ideas for horror fans.

WHAT ABOUT YOU? What do you think about the state of the horror genre in roleplaying? If you have a response to Jean-Paul's piece, write in and let us know at the address printed below. We look forward to hearing from you.

ON THE SOAPBOX is your page – it's where we give you the opportunity to get something off your chest (as long as it's to do with the gaming industry, of course). The views expressed by you on this page aren't necessarily the views of arcane, or of the arcane editorial team. If you'd like to have your say, send in a piece of around 1,000 words long to: On the Soapbox, arcane, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW. Or e-mail it to: arcane@futurenet.co.uk

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The deadly art of war

This month **Matthew Green** wonders why the play-by-mail scene is so obsessed with war.

REGULAR READERS OF THIS column will by now have noticed that 'war' is a theme that seems particularly prevalent among play-by-mail games. Even the official Tolkien-based PBM concentrates more on the warring factions of *Middle-earth,* than the obvious rich tapestry of background that would lend so well to single character adventures. So why all this emphasis on war? Is it that all those PBM designers are just bloodthirsty egomaniacs, or is there another more acceptable answer to the question? This month we investigate two popular play-by-mail games that are promoted and advertised as wargames, and find out why they can sometimes offer a roleplaying experience that is second to none.

Outside the PBM fraternity roleplaying is almost always approached from the first-person perspective – a single warrior, a mage or perhaps a wayward star traveller – and for over-the-table systems that's exactly what you want. It works well. Play-by-mail is just the opposite. If you think PBM then think war – the introduction of various minions for you to exercise control over, and territory for you to win, is the undeniable spark that brings your characters to life.

Austerlitz

TBA Games Ltd, Rules plus start-up £10, future turns £3-£4 each.

Austerlitz is probably one of the most breathtaking of all the pure war-based PBM systems, and it's the main reason for the emphasis on war in this month's column. As the name may suggest, it's a Napoleonic wargame, set in the year 1808 at the height of Napoleon's power. As a player in this game you are the leader of one of Europe's 16 most powerful nations, and as such gain a truly unique roleplaying experience. Imagine taking the role of Napoleon, or any other European leader of his time – the responsibility resting on your shoulders is immense.

Building and fielding vast armies and navies, effectively managing and improving your economy, developing trade routes throughout the colonies – these are all things you have to do to survive, and they are all things that your opponents have a certain flair for. But if you are from a roleplaying background you may just have a distinct advantage because one of the most important aspects of this game is diplomacy, and this should be the key to your success in the game.

If you are able to really grasp any character and can place your heart and soul in their situation, you are already one step ahead. Don't let greed for victory and conquest be your driving force. Proceed with caution, imagine that it really is your country that you are leading, and that it really is your people on the line…

When you start your game of *Austerlitz* you are given the names and addresses of the other 15 people who are playing with you. The main source of your roleplaying enjoyment is in contacting these players and maintaining that contact for the game's duration. Use your skill to be friends with everyone, but without everyone knowing that is the case. Know when to ask for favours and when to give them. (If you have a spare fleet of ships and Charles I wants his troops moved across the Mediterranean, then lend a hand – next month he might be able to transfer those horses that you need.)

By staying in touch with these other players you should also be able to build up a picture of any weaknesses they may be trying to hide, which might give you the signal you need to start your career of invasion and conquest. Furthermore, I found that when a supposed 'friend' lets you down on an arranged deal, you are catapulted into an entirely new gaming dimension. It's not a revenge scenario, as many of us have experienced in mainstream RPGs, but rather a real-life feeling of betrayal – launching your armies towards such an opponent is sweet indeed!

For more information contact:

TBA Games Ltd, PO Box 1812, Kilmarnock, NA1 1DF

techy terms

Having read the panel on the left you might be wondering what the difference between 'hand-moderated' and 'computer-moderated' is. Computer-moderated games are generally faster between turns, and often have a more numeric output, lists of troops, locations and so on (although Harlequin has attempted to produce a more text-based output in *Endgame*). Hand-moderated games are those that have turn results carefully written by the referee, and are more similar in nature to over-the-table systems, usually offering greater atmosphere.

Warlord

(KJC Games, free start-up plus 3 turns, future turns £2.10 each.

Although initially *Warlord* seems to offer less roleplaying opportunity than *Austerlitz,* it has an almost manic degree of action. It is simple to play, set on a mythical world occupied by your modern-era nation and 99 others. 100 players makes for a lot of paranoia, but if you're brave you will persevere. This is an ideal game for people who have had very little play-by-mail experience in the past.

For more details contact: KJC Games, Freepost, Thornton Cleveleys, Lancashire, FY5 3BR.

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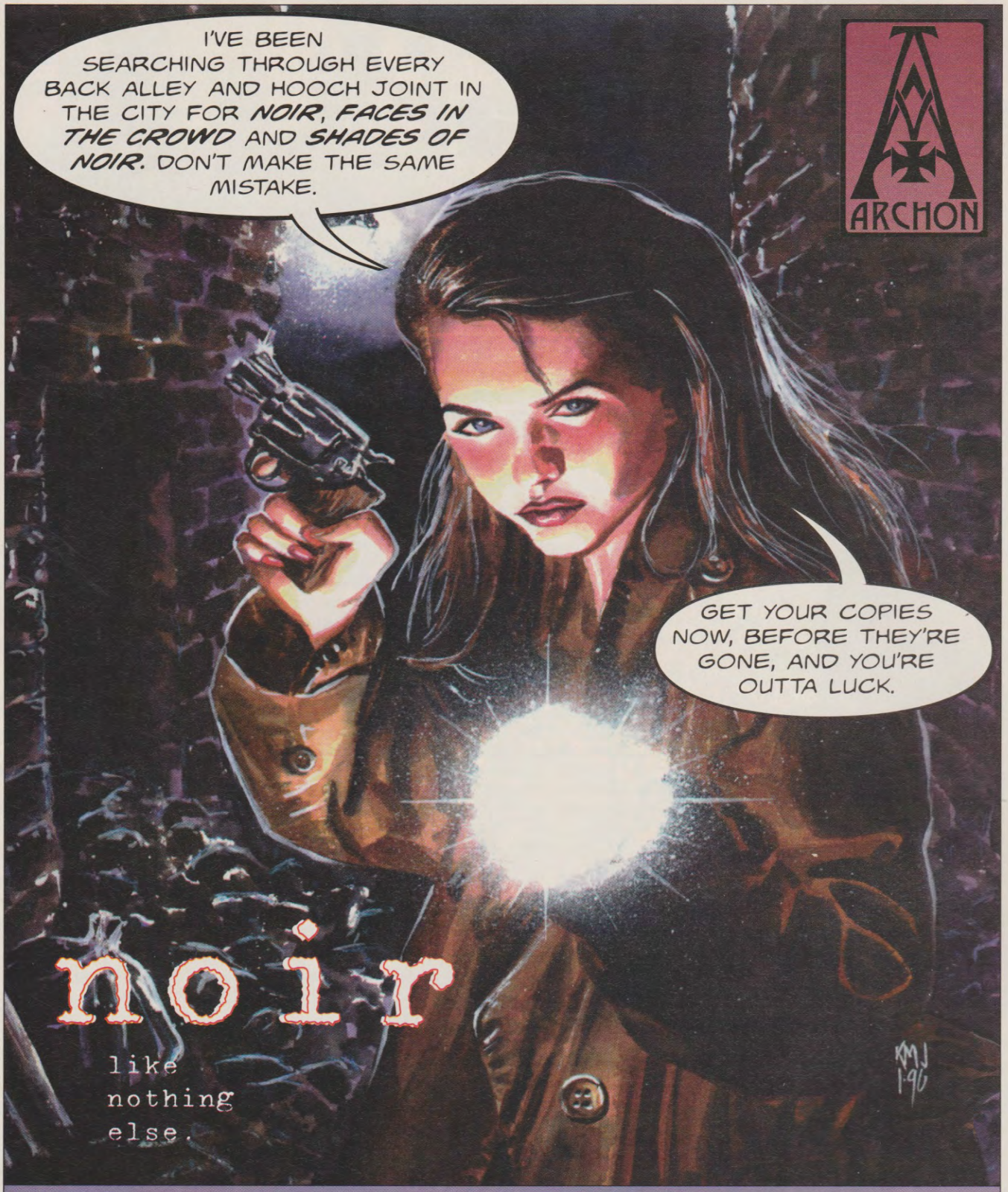
***Endgame:* This is a computer-moderated game of magical arena combat. Each player is a powerful mage trying to destroy opponents and survive. The game's moderator is currently offering your first game for £10. Contact Harlequin Games, 41 Treherbert St, Cardiff, CF2 4JN.**

drop us a line **If you have any PBM related questions please feel free to drop us a line here at arcane. We're especially interested in hearing from anyone who's recently won a PBM game, so that you can pass any advice or tips on to other arcane readers. Apart from the world-wide fame and goodwill this would bring you, you might even be lucky enough to win yourself the ultimate in sexy leisurewear – an arcane T-shirt.**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Living Steel

It may have had a terrible cover, but *Living Steel* is, says Paul Pettengale, a forgotten masterpiece.

Designed by Barry Nakazono and David McKenzie

Published by Leading Edge Games £17.95

First Published in 1987

HANDS UP THOSE OF YOU WHO'VE ever played *Living Steel*. Hmm, not many. Okay, hands up those of you who've ever read *Living Steel*. No? Well, have any of you even heard about it, apart from my intermittent ramblings within the pages of **arcane**? Not a very popular system then, is it?

Which is a huge shame, because *Living Steel*, a campaign which I ran over a six-month period at the end of the 1980s, has one of the most interesting campaign backgrounds going. On the surface it's a post-apocalyptic game – aliens have ravaged the planet of Rand with a virus which turns humans into, well, a violent, sadistic and somewhat antisocial bunch. These aliens are sitting above the surface of the planet in their large ships just waiting for the virus to really kick in and for society to collapse completely. But at a deeper level it's far more than that, because it deals with the ways that societies interact and how 'hidden forces' within those societies manipulate the agenda of war to meet their own aims.

The players run a number of characters each, the principal of which is a Sword, a special trooper from a long-extinct race of Bhuddist-like warriors who have somehow been placed on Rhand in its time of crisis. The other characters played are support staff for the Swords who have been miraculously saved from the virus, and who have been placed in special installations out of which small collections of Swords (a party, in other words) operate.

The player characters' mission? To restore order to the world, and to thwart the alien machinations. Which is a pretty tall order, especially because when the campaign is started, they know virtually nothing about where they are or why they're there. The first few months of playing are little more than the players learning the art of survival in a society gone terribly wrong, negotiating with the other power groups in the area of Rhand they've ended up in, and performing the odd mercy mission.

Indeed, *Living Steel* is entirely geared towards protracted campaign play. It's almost impossible to construct scenarios for it which don't fit within an ongoing story, with elements overlapping all over the place. This makes for a fully immersive roleplaying experience – yes, it's serious stuff, with little opportunity for humour, but it's also incredibly involving to play.

The Rhand setting provides some great opportunities for roleplaying. The planet's collapsed caste system has thrust the landed aristocracy into a situation where it's having to fend for itself – impossible, virtually, because the upper echelons of society have always been able to rely on others to support them. These people will turn to the PCs for help and protection, but they'll demand it rather than request it – how do the PCs deal with that? They're there to preserve the crumbling society, but are faced with elements of a society which are bigoted and elitis and opposed to the principles which their ex society taught them.

The game uses a fantastic device, which enables the referee to place the player characters anywhere on the world of Rhand and then keep them there for a fixed period of time before they can return to base. The teleportation system, which was used as the main means of transportation across the planet, has been crippled by the alien bombardment so that only one of the many satellites required for operation remains. The system can be used, but only during a short time window when the satellite is overhead; so characters can jump anywhere on Rhand, but they then have to stay there, suffering all that the referee has to chuck at them until the satellite is over the area that they've moved too. This is a great way for the referee to control (pretty well) what the players get up to, without it seeming forced or contrived. The additional benefit being that in a society where teleportation is used as the primary means of transport, there are very few land vehicles for the player characters to use. Great stuff.

The system has been described as being a little over-complicated, and there's no doubt in my mind that it's realistic, with a level of complexity which reflects this realism. The combat rules are deadly, to the extent where players almost always attempt to avoid a firefight if at all possible. Indeed, the designers fired actual weapons at dummies (or so it is said) in order to calculate the various effects of differently-sized calibre weapons. The result is a whole bunch of tables with entries such as 'Shin – foot: disabling injury' and 'Upper arm – flesh: superficial wound', to make your players wince.

"The combat rules are deadly, to the extent where players almost always attempt to avoid a firefight."

Skills resolution is also a pain, so to speak, with different classes of skills (labelled A through to G), subdivided into specific skills such as Climbing, Infiltration, Diplomacy and the like. Each character has a Skill Level for skills listed, depending upon proficiency, and that level is rolled against, as adjusted by modifiers and the Action/Reaction system. It is as complicated as it sounds, but it does make for a high degree of realism.

The actual effect of a complex system, however, is a concentration on roleplaying. Yes it may seem odd, but if the system is hard work, the referee often pretty well forgets about it and concentrates on roleplaying through situations rather than getting the dice out. With a campaign background as fantastic as the one boasted by *Living Steel*, roleplaying is a pleasing prospect. So it's a shame that the game never received much support, or indeed the kind of recognition that it deserved. What's more, there's little chance of it ever being rekindled save, perhaps, for the campaign I'm sure I'll run again...

ROCK AWAY

There was only one full-length scenario published for *Living Steel* – it was called *KViSR-Rocks!* and it was all about a radio station that was preaching anti-establishment propaganda, and the attempts of one of the Spectral aliens to take control of a city.

MANO-A-MANO

Leading Edge Games also produced a skirmish/wargame based on *Living Steel*. Called *Dragonstar Rising*, it details battles between various Imperium forces, most of which were armoured in the Living Steel combat suits from which the RPG got its name.

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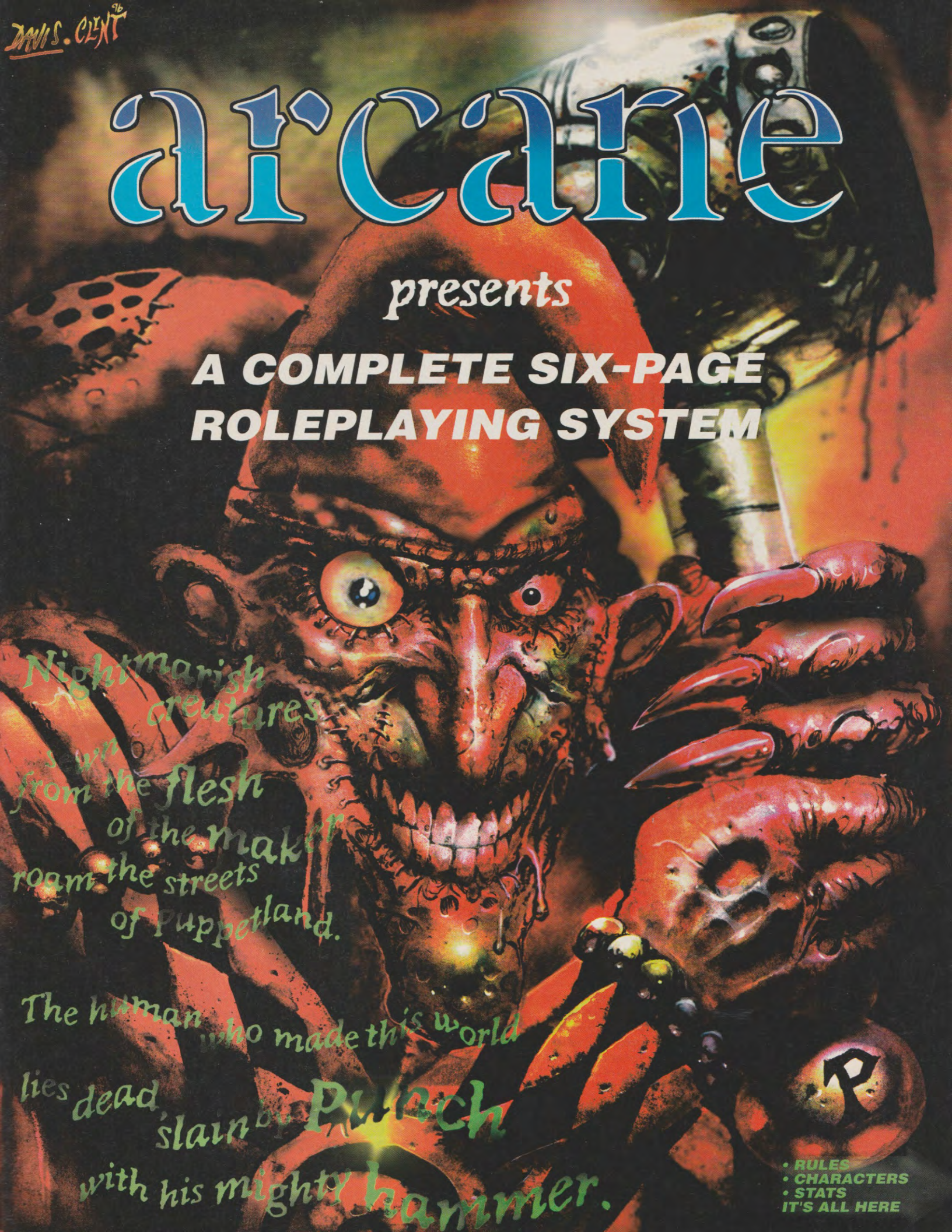
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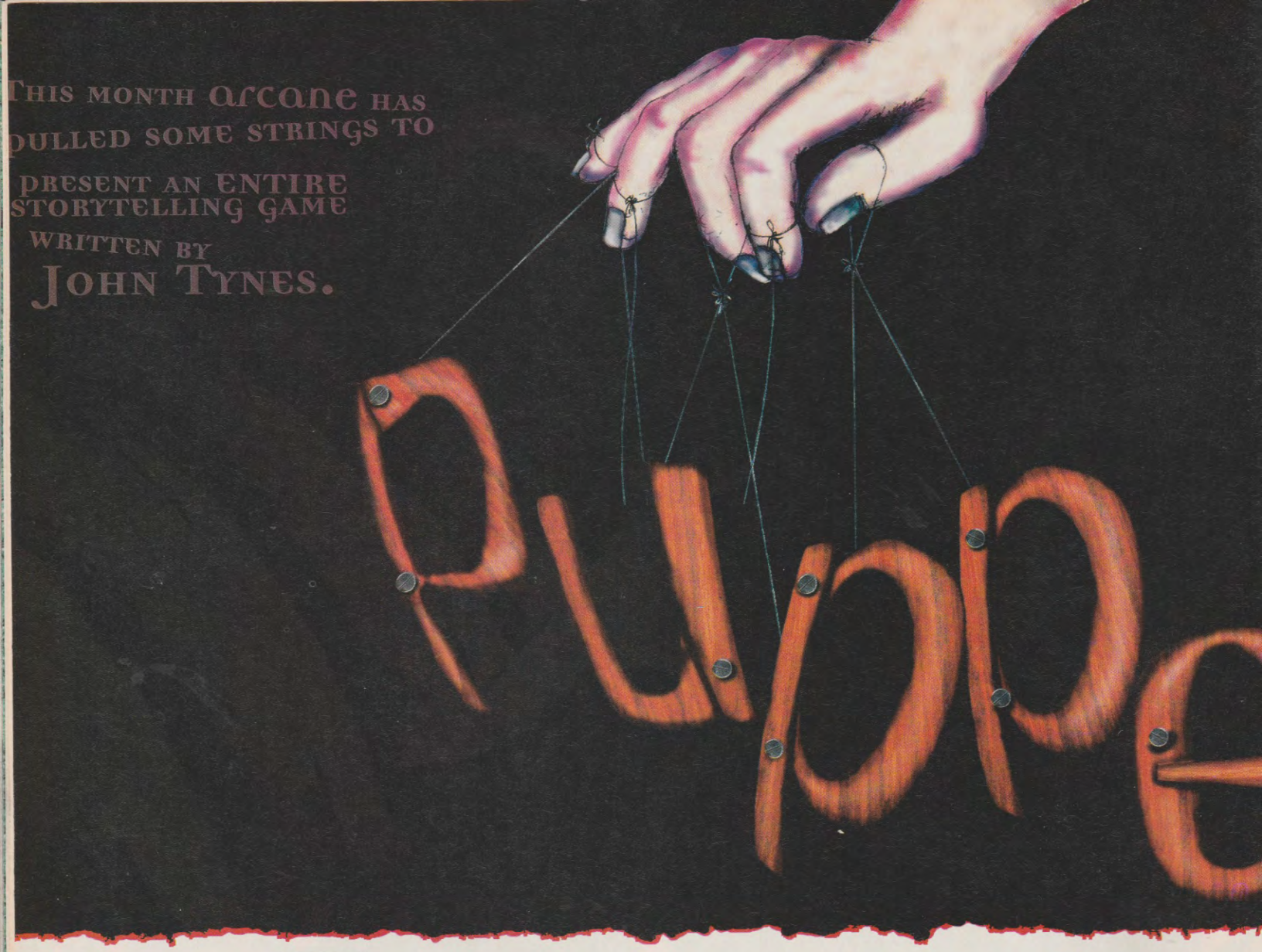

the gaming magazine arcane presents Puppetland

THE AUTHOR

John Tynes is the editor-in-chief of Pagan Publishing, producer of books and magazines for Chaosium's *Call of Cthulhu* horror roleplaying game. As well as *CoC*, his writing credits include work for Atlas Games' *Over the Edge* and *Pandemonium!*, Darcsyde's *Trauma*, Acclaim Entertainment's *Magic: The Gathering - Battlemage* computer game, and Steve Jackson Games' *In Nomine*. Besides working for Pagan Publishing, John has served as Dominia continuity editor for Wizards of the Coast and was the *Feng Shui* line editor for Daedalus Entertainment. Presently he makes his living as a freelance writer, editor, graphic designer and web page creator in Seattle, USA. He drinks milk in lieu of breathing.

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Puppetland logo design by Maryanne Booth.

WORDS FROM THE MAKER

A while back (last year sometime) I started tinkering with an RPG design. The game is called *Puppetland*. At heart, it's a weird horror game that bears more resemblance to some sort of group storytelling than to normal RPG play.

Puppetland is best described as a storytelling game with strings attached set in a grim world of make-believe. The players take the roles of puppets – finger puppets, hand puppets, marionettes or shadow puppets – in a horrific world ruled by the bloodthirsty Punch. He is served by the Nutcrackers, mindless troops who crush the body parts of rebellious puppets in their clacking jaws, and by Punch's Boys, nightmarish creatures sewn from the flesh of the Maker, the human who made this world and who was slain by Punch with his mighty hammer.

As good-hearted puppets in a bad-hearted world, the players are part of an enclave headed by Judy, who was once Punch's lover but now his bitter foe. They engage in all manner of schemes to defeat Punch and restore the world of Puppetland to its former happy state.

Like I said, it's weird.

I developed the game for a while and then moved on to something else. The concepts of the game will probably show up in another game that I'm in the process of developing, but *Puppetland* as it is will probably only ever see print in the pages of arcane. What's more, this feature contains everything that currently exists for *Puppetland*. It covers the world, the backstory, the major players, character creation and gameplay.

Puppetland was developed as a diceless non-system – it's simply storytelling with a group of people. If you're a decent, fairly experienced referee, and prepared to put in a bit of work, you can probably run *Puppetland* using the information here alone. However, you might also find it useful to adapt the world to your favourite game system.

The World of Puppetland

The skies are always dim since the Maker died. The lights of Puppettown are the brightest beacon in all of Puppetland, and they shine all the time. Once the sun and the moon moved their normal course through the heavens, but no more. The rise of Punch the Maker-Killer has brought all of nature to a standstill, leaving it perpetually winter, perpetually night. Puppets all across Puppetland mourn the loss of the Maker, and curse the name of Punch – but not too loudly, lest the Nutcrackers hear and come to call with a sharp rap-rap-rapping at the door.

Many years ago there was a war in the real world. Many people were hurt and terrible things happened. The Maker saw all that was happening, and was sorrowful. His creations were the gentlest of creatures, and they were terribly hurt by these tragedies. The Maker made puppets, and in the face of chaos and violence he came up with a great creation: Maker's Land, a world where all his puppets and all the puppets in the world could go and be safe until the war was over.

It was in this way that Maker's Land came to be. One morning the world woke up and all the puppets were gone. Hand puppets, finger puppets, marionettes and others – just gone. The puppets woke up and found they were in Maker's Land, where no terrible humans could hurt them again.

In Maker's Land all was well. The puppetfolk lived without fear and suspicion, and spent their days happy and free. No hands controlled them. No strings pulled them. They could live as they cared, their every need met. All were safe and sound. The Maker was the only human in the whole land, and he was good and kind. He mended broken puppets, made new puppets, and kept out any trace of the fleshy humans who now (except for the Maker, of course) lived only in the puppets' dreams.

Then came Punch, who fancied himself as the greatest of all puppets. He crept into the Maker's house one night with a great mallet, and he slew the Maker as the human slept. With the Maker's death, no humans lived in Maker's Land. But the flesh lived, because Punch took the Maker's face and made a cruel new face for himself. That wasn't all he made, either – by morning, he had not just a new face, but six loyal puppet servants sewn of the Maker's flesh. These six, whom Punch called his Boys, stood beside Punch as he announced to all the land that he was now the king. He was Punch the Maker-Killer, and his word was law.

Punch and Punch's Boys now rule Maker's Land with a lack of mercy. All puppets exist to serve them. The puppets toil for hours on end making new clothes, new homes, new food, new toys – whatever Punch and his Boys want.

"He was now the king. He was Punch the Maker-Killer, and his word was law."

At least, almost all of the puppets do so.

Across the great lake of milk and cookies lies the small village of Respite. The village is run by Judy, who once loved Punch but does so no more. She knows better than anyone the cruelties he is capable of. She knows the evil that lies in his twisted heart. In her little village she runs a freehold of puppets who have escaped from Punch's clutches. They have avoided the terrible Nutcrackers, fled the cruelties of Punch's Boys, and made their way to Respite where Judy's small group of free puppets look towards the day when Punch will be brought down and the Maker restored to life. When Punch killed the Maker, Judy was there and she caught the Maker's last tear in a thimble of purest silver. Judy says that with this tear the Maker can be brought back to life. This is her fondest dream, and the Maker's tear is her most cherished possession.

The Types of Puppets

Four types of puppets are provided for play in *Puppetland*. The puppet master and the actors are welcome to create new types, but note that each type has specific attributes and that new types should conform to this style by selecting similar attributes, or creating new ones that fit with the existing ones. These attributes aren't just general descriptions, they are exacting statements of what a puppet can and cannot do. All puppets can talk, move, think, pick things up and do other basic actions. The attributes characterise such actions and also set out less common actions. A finger puppet, who is 'quick', can always outrun a hand puppet who is 'not very fast', unless the finger puppet is badly hurt or otherwise impeded from normal movement.

FINGER PUPPETS are: short and small, light, quick and weak.
Finger Puppets can: move quickly, dodge things thrown at them even if they only see them coming at the last moment, and move very quietly.
Finger Puppets cannot: kick things, throw things or grab things, because they have no legs or arms.

HAND PUPPETS are: medium size, quite heavy, not very fast and fairly strong.
Hand Puppets can: move at a normal pace, dodge things thrown at them if they see them coming as soon as they are thrown, throw things, grab things, hit things weakly, and move quietly if they are lucky and careful.
Hand Puppets cannot: kick things, move quicker than a finger puppet, or move quieter than a finger puppet.

SHADOW PUPPETS are: tall and thin, light, quick and weak.
Shadow Puppets can: move quickly, dodge things thrown at them by turning sideways, kick things, throw things, grab things, and become invisible if they are careful and cautious.
Shadow Puppets cannot: kick, throw or grab things that weigh more than a piece of paper, be invisible if they aren't trying, be invisible to more than one puppet at a time or get wet, because getting completely wet kills them.

MARIONETTE PUPPETS are: tall and stocky, heavy, slow and strong.
Marionette Puppets can: move slowly, kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, and hit things very hard.
Marionette Puppets cannot: dodge things thrown at them, or move very quickly.

Punch and his Boys

Punch the Maker-Killer is a megalomaniac. A twisted and vicious puppet, he has been corrupted by the ways of humans, and was so before the Maker's Land ever came to be. That he kept this corruption hidden deep within his bitter heart – so that even the Maker couldn't see it – is a tribute to his high intelligence and cleverness. Punch is a wily, cruel puppet who lives only to exert power over others and gain more power for himself. He is selfish and bestial, freely abusing those near him when it suits him to do so. Punch is vindictive and takes even the smallest remark as a personal affront worthy of being burned alive at the stake – his standard punishment for any disobedient puppet.

Punch wears a red cloak and hobbles about under the weight of the great deformity on his back. At all times, he wears a hood over his entire head made of the dead flesh of the Maker. He has cut eye and mouth holes in this fleshy hood so he can see and eat, and wears atop the hood a red cap that he dipped in the Maker's blood. Punch the Maker-Killer carries with him a great mallet. When angry, he usually chooses an innocent puppet nearby and beats him to death with the mallet in an explosion of fury.

PUNCH
Puppet type: Unique (Marionette)
This puppet is: tall and stocky, heavy, slow, cunning, impatient, cruel and strong.
This puppet can: move slowly, kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, command the Nutcrackers and Boys, order any puppet to do anything and kill them if they don't, work magic and hit things very hard.
This puppet cannot: dodge things thrown at him, feel emotions, survive without his mask of flesh, allow disobedience or move very quickly.

The Game of Puppetland

Puppetland is very specifically a game, and should be thought of as such. The object is to defeat Punch the Maker-Killer and save Maker's Land. To do this, each participant in the game is an actor, and the character each actor portrays is a puppet. Unlike an actor in a play, each character's lines and actions are up to the actor, not to a script, so the actors must be prepared to get into the mind-set of their character and say and do the kinds of things their character would say and do. There is one participant who does not play just a single puppet, and this is the puppet master. The puppet master is responsible for creating and/or presenting the game, and he or she serves as referee for the game's rules and as an actor who portrays several supporting roles. The actors portray the leading roles, and the puppet master portrays the roles of the supporting characters that the actors meet.

Actors are unlikely to reach the object of defeating Punch straight away. Each time you play *Puppetland* you play a tale. A tale is, in effect, a single game

"Punch is vindictive and takes even personal affront worthy of being

of *Puppetland* in which progress is made towards the object of the game. Over the course of a series of tales, the actors strive to achieve the object of the game and defeat Punch the Maker-Killer. When they do, the game is over. This may take only a few tales, or it may take many. How long it takes is up to the number of tales the referee wishes to tell, and how quickly and efficiently the actors make their way through these tales.

Puppetland has three important rules...

The First Rule

an hour is golden, but it is not an hour...

A tale of *Puppetland* can last no more than an hour. Puppets are special and magical creatures, and can only move around and do things for an hour at a time. The puppet master should keep a watch handy, and once an hour has passed the tale for the evening must end. Note, however, that the puppets are aware of this rule and always know how long they have before the hour ends. When the hour is up, all of the puppets in Maker's Land fall asleep; when they awaken, at the start of the next tale, they are all safely back in their beds where they begin every tale. Things outside are still the same as they were at the end of the previous tale, except that all the puppets (who survived) are back in their beds snug and warm. Wounds from one tale are not carried over to the next tale – injured or maimed puppets awaken whole and well again – but puppets who die never return. An hour is golden.

A *Puppetland* tale may seem to last more than an hour – for instance, the puppets might make a long journey that takes many days. But time only passes in the time it takes to talk about what you are doing. A puppet can say, 'I sleep for a week!' and a week has gone by, but only a few seconds have passed on the clock. The clock is the arbiter of time, as it should be, not the actions of the puppets. The time passed is the time in which the tale is told, not the time in which the events of the tale occur. An hour is not an hour.

The Second Rule

what you say is what you say...

During a game of *Puppetland*, it is very important that as long as the actors are sitting in their chairs, they say only what their puppet says. Every word a player says while seated comes out of his or her puppet's mouth, exactly as the actor said it. No actor should say anything while seated that he or she does not mean for their puppet to say, at all, even if it's 'pass the crisps', or 'I'm going to the bathroom'. If an actor wants to say something that their puppet does not say, he or she must stand up and say it. If an actor wants his or her puppet to do something besides speak, this must be stated as something the puppet says – for example, if an actor wants his puppet to climb a ladder to a window, he might say 'I think I shall climb the ladder, and go in the window.' If an actor wants his puppet to take a hammer and smash a window, he might say, 'With this hammer I now hold, I shall smash the window in!' All forms of action that an actor wishes his or her puppet to take must be expressed as dialogue spoken by the puppet, though the dialogue can be kept simple. The puppet master is expected to infer appropriate action based on the dialogue and need not have every step spelled out.

An actor cannot ask a question of the puppet master, because in Maker's Land there is no puppet master and hence no-one to whom the actor's puppet would address such a question. If an actor does not quite understand something that the puppet master has said, or desires more information, he or she should simply say something like, 'I don't quite understand all this', or 'I find this all most confusing'. The puppet master will then attempt to explain things better. The puppet master can ask the actor a direct question, out of character, but it must be a yes-or-no question and the actor must answer it by shaking or nodding his or her head – he or she cannot speak except in character.

If the actor or the puppet master simply must converse out of character, the actor must get up and come over to the referee, and the two must hold their discussion in whispers so that nobody else can hear. If the actor needs to then communicate information he or she has just learned to the other actors, he or she should, if at all possible, sit back down and communicate the information in the voice of his or her puppet. Out-of-character conversation should be avoided at all costs and at any inconvenience.

the smallest remark as a burned alive at the stake."

To help this process work, imagine that somewhere, someone is reading everything that the actors and the puppet master say, verbatim. This someone is expecting to read a story, told like a story, with appropriate dialogue and description. As a rule of the game, you must endeavour to make every spoken word sound like part of a story rather than an out-of-game conversation between a bunch of people at a table.

The Third Rule

The tale grows in the telling, and is being told to someone not present...

The puppet master must realise that while he or she has a certain tale in mind, that tale may not be the one that ends up being told. The actors must realise that they are a part of the tale they are hearing – they create the dialogue of the main characters. They should strive to make their dialogue sound as colourful and appropriate as possible, and should also try to make the tale as entertaining and unpredictable as they can. Together, the puppet master and the actors create a tale better and more exciting than any one of them could have created on their own.

If you always imagine that someone is reading every word that is spoken during a game of *Puppetland*, it's easy to see how they would be disappointed if the words sound bad, don't flow well or don't even make sense. Because this is a tale, it should always be told in the past tense except for dialogue, which is expressed in the present tense.

Here's a bad example of playing *Puppetland*...

Puppet master: "Okay, the door bursts in and there's a bunch of those Nutcracker guys standing there. One of them yells at you to stop."

Actor 1: "Let's get out the back door, and fast!"

Actor 2: "I pick up the rock and throw it at a Nutcracker!"

Puppet master: "You throw the rock at him and smash the Nutcracker's jaw. He can't bite anymore."

And here's how it should be done...

Puppet master: "And then, without warning, the door burst down! Three Nutcrackers stood there, one of them still chomping on the doorknob. 'Stop, you mangy puppets!' cried one."

Actor 1: "Run! Run out the back door! We must escape the Nutcrackers!"

Actor 2: "Where is that rock? Here it is! I shall hurl this rock and smash your greedy mouth, Nutcracker!"

Puppet master: "The rock flew right across the room and smacked the first Nutcracker in the jaw. 'Rmmf!' cried the injured Nutcracker. 'He cannot bite nor chomp!' cried another. And he was right, the rock hit so hard that the Nutcracker's jaw was broken in two."

Punch's Boys are six in number, and if anything the puppetfolk are more afraid of them than they are of Punch because it is the boys who go out and enforce Punch's insane edicts. They are the ones who glide through the streets of Puppettown and the roads of Puppetland each night, their feetless forms moving swiftly through the air like vengeful spirits. The boys are hollow cloaks of human flesh, cut from the dead skin of the Maker. Their names are Spite, Haunt, Grief, Vengeance, Mayhem and Stealth.

SPITE

Largest of the boys, Spite is a bully with a loud voice and a face contorted in anger and jealousy. He wanders the streets and the roads, and rips an arm off any puppet who he feels is trying to look better than he does. Spite paints his face to look more normal, but only succeeds in increasing his gruesomeness. He has maimed dozens of puppets in his time, and has no intention of stopping.

Puppet type: Unique (Flesh)
This puppet is: short and stocky, heavy, slow and strong.
This puppet can: kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, tear off a puppet's limb, yell loudly all the time, order any puppet to do anything and maim them if they don't.
This puppet cannot: move quickly, allow disobedience or betray Punch.

HAUNT

This character is greatly feared by those puppets who plot against Punch, because he can feel the wispy emotions of betrayal. Haunt never attacks or hurts any puppet. Instead, he is drawn towards feelings of betrayal and vengeance, and it is near the source of these feelings that he spends his time. Haunt floats around grimly in an ever-tightening circle. Whenever the other Boys happen to run across the voiceless Haunt circling, they begin searching house to house within Haunt's circle looking for traitors. Anyone they even suspect of harbouring disloyalty to Punch is sentenced to the flames.

Puppet type: Unique (Flesh)
This puppet is: short, light, fast and weak.
This puppet can: move quickly, sense a puppet's disobedience, circle a disobedient puppet closer and closer.
This puppet cannot: allow disobedience, betray Punch, hurt anyone.

GRIEF

He is a tool of Punch's justice. One of Punch's first edicts was 'Everyone must always be happy!' and it is this edict that Grief has especial responsibility to enforce. Grief wanders aimlessly, seeking those who are not trying to be happy. If he finds someone who is obviously sad, for any reason, he rips them limb from limb.

Puppet type: Unique (Flesh)
This puppet is: tall, heavy, of average speed and strong.
This puppet can: kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, notice a puppet's obvious sadness, kill any puppet who is sad.
This puppet cannot: allow disobedience, betray Punch.

VENGEANCE

Also a tool of Punch's justice. When Haunt or another Boy finds a traitor and they aren't in a hurry, they summon Vengeance to the scene. Vengeance's speciality is hurting puppets, or at least hurting traitors. He knows many ways to make a puppet scream, and delights in finding new ways he hasn't thought of before.

Puppet type: Unique (Flesh)
This puppet is: short, heavy, slow and strong.
This puppet can: kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, torture puppets, find new ways to torture puppets.
This puppet cannot: allow disobedience, betray Punch.

MAYHEM

Many puppets fear Mayhem constantly because he is Punch's implement of random destruction. Mayhem is seen very rarely, but when he is seen it is because he is coming to kill. Mayhem arrives in a village suddenly, and begins killing puppets seemingly at random. He never speaks, never explains. He just rends puppets part from part, dragging marionettes by their strings through the snowy streets, or setting fire to a screaming finger puppet just to watch it go bouncing and sparking through the streets.

Puppet type: Unique (Flesh)
This puppet is: of medium height, of average weight, fast and very strong.
This puppet can: move quickly, kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, and kill a puppet in seconds.
This puppet cannot: allow disobedience, betray Punch.

STEALTH

This boy is seen even less often than Mayhem, because he can pull off his cloak of skin and reveal nothing underneath. Stealth's speciality is spying. Because he can become invisible, he tries to follow suspected traitors and find out what they're up to. Twice, some brave puppet has found Stealth's discarded cloak of flesh and tried to destroy it, but failed both times. Stealth cannot speak or communicate in any way without his cloak, and for this reason can be considered somewhat vulnerable.

Puppet type: Unique (Flesh)
This puppet is: short, light, fast and weak.
This puppet can: move quickly, kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, take off his cloak of flesh and become invisible and silent.
This puppet cannot: allow disobedience, betray Punch, communicate without his cloak of flesh.

The Nutcrackers

In addition to his Boys, Punch has a small army of Nutcrackers who maintain order and enforce the laws. These red-suited soldiers stomp endlessly through the streets of Puppettown and the land beyond. They are not particularly intelligent, but their great, fierce mouths are sized just right for shattering the joints of marionettes or crushing the parts of any puppet. Punch's Boys are more feared than seen. The Nutcrackers, on the other hand, are seen every day and remind all the puppets of the land just who is boss.

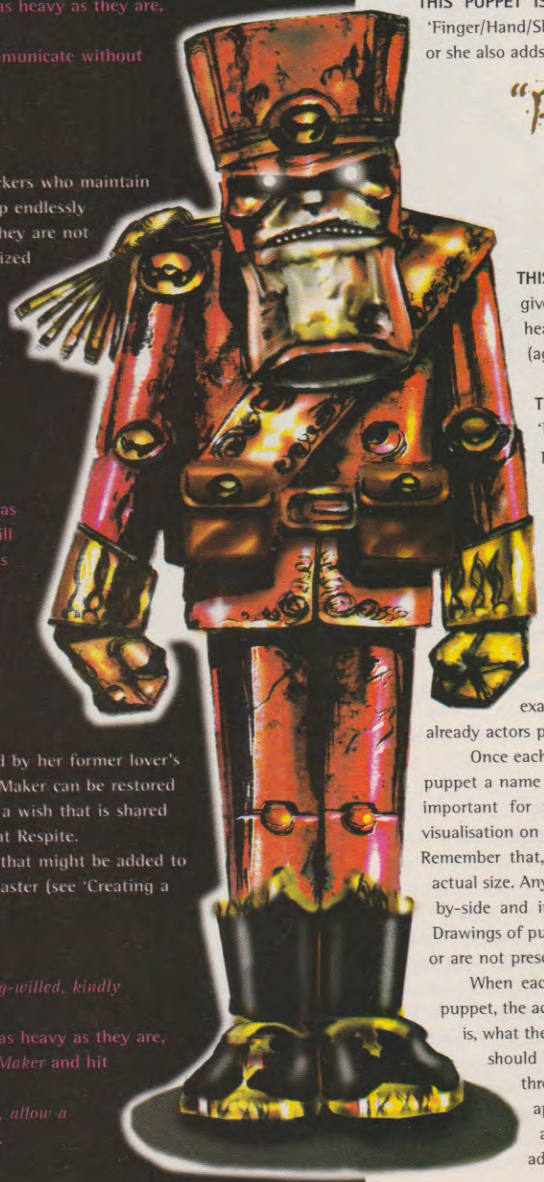
None of them have real names
Puppet type: Nutcracker
This puppet is: tall and stocky, heavy, fast and strong.
This puppet can: move quickly, kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, order any puppet to do anything and kill them if they don't, crunch parts of puppets or other things with their teeth, and hit things very hard.
This puppet cannot: dodge things thrown at him, feel any emotions, allow disobedience, betray Punch or move very quickly.

Judy

Judy witnessed the slaying of the Maker and was horrified by her former lover's vicious cruelty. Nevertheless, she holds out hope that the Maker can be restored using the tear she collected from him on that fateful day, a wish that is shared with all the puppetfolk who have reached her safe haven at Respite.

The stats given here in italics are examples of some that might be added to the character by the player and agreed with the puppet master (see 'Creating a Puppet' on the right).

Puppet type: Marionette
This puppet is: tall and stocky, heavy, slow, *hopeful, strong-willed, kindly* and strong.
This puppet can: move slowly, kick, throw or grab things as heavy as they are, *make handy things, figure out tough dilemmas, revive the Maker* and hit things very hard.
This puppet cannot: dodge things thrown at her, *tell a lie, allow a puppet to suffer, hurt Punch directly* or move very quickly.



The Puppetsheet

The puppet sheet is the piece of paper that an actor describes his or her character on, and keeps handy during play to refer to. It contains all of the information about an actor's puppet that isn't just made up at their discretion; rather, it contains the information that is set for the puppet right from the start and can't be changed. Each puppet sheet has five parts. These parts are listed below.

NAME: This is the puppet's name, as chosen by the player. Names in *Puppetland* are usually composed of two pieces. The first is the puppet's common name, the name by which other puppets refer to him or her informally. This is always a name that would be familiar to most actors, such as 'Sally', 'Jim' or 'Nadja'. The second is the puppet's unique name, a name by which no other puppet is known. The unique name is usually descriptive of the puppet, such as 'Red Buttons', 'Tassle Hair' or 'Purple Hat'. A puppet's full (or formal) name consists of both names strung together, such as 'Sally Red Buttons', 'Jim Tassle Hair' or 'Nadja Purple Hat'.

PICTURE: This is where the player draws his or her puppet, to the best of his or her ability. Even if this is just a stick figure, that's fine. The important thing to remember is that this drawing must be done at actual size. An actor's puppet can be no larger than the picture box, and is assumed to be exactly the size it is drawn at. Therefore, the actor should keep in mind the type of puppet he or she is playing when making this drawing – a marionette takes up much more room than a finger puppet. There are also jigsaw puzzle lines, but these can be ignored at first. They are used during play, and do not effect initial puppet creation.

THIS PUPPET IS: Here, the actor copies the information given under the 'Finger/Hand/Shadow/Marionette Puppets Are' heading given on page 26. He or she also adds information as desired (discussed in 'Creating a Puppet' below).

"Punch's Boys are the ones
Puppettown each night, th
through the air

THIS PUPPET CAN: Here again the actor copies the information given under the 'Finger/Hand/Shadow/Marionette Puppets Can' heading on page 26. He or she also adds information as desired (again discussed below).

THIS PUPPET CANNOT: This information is also copied from the 'Finger/Hand/Shadow/Marionette Puppets Cannot' heading on page 26. And again, more information can be added (also discussed below).

Creating a puppet

Each actor chooses one of the four puppet types – Finger, Hand, Shadow or Marionette. This should be done as a group. Each puppet type has advantages and disadvantages, and an ideal group will have at least one of every puppet type for maximum versatility. Two actors should avoid playing the same puppet type unless they either have a good reason for it (for example, the puppets are part of the same family) or there are already actors playing all four puppet types.

Once each actor has chosen his or her puppet type, they need to give their puppet a name and draw a picture of their puppet on the character sheet. It is important for the actor to visualise their puppet and try to express that visualisation on a piece of paper, no matter how primitive their rendition may be. Remember that, as mentioned above, the puppet should always be drawn at actual size. Any two actors should be able to hold their character sheets up side-by-side and immediately know whose puppet is bigger, taller, or whatever. Drawings of puppets should also make a point of showing clearly what limbs are or are not present.

When each actor has chosen a name and drawn a picture of his or her puppet, the actor should then write the following information: what the puppet is, what the puppet can do and what the puppet cannot do. This information should be copied from the list given earlier, but the player must choose three additional items to add to each list. These additions must be approved by the puppet master. By way of explanation, take a look at the following puppet details. The items given in italics are additions chosen by the actor.

NAME: Sally Red Buttons
PUPPET TYPE: Hand Puppet
THIS PUPPET IS: medium size, quite heavy, not very fast, fairly strong, *very clever, quite pretty* and *good at magic tricks.*
THIS PUPPET CAN: move at a normal pace, dodge things thrown at her if she sees them coming as soon as they are thrown, throw things, grab things, hit things weakly, *do magic tricks, charm a puppet into doing her a favour, sing very well,* and move quietly if she is lucky and careful.
THIS PUPPET CANNOT: kick things, move quicker than a finger puppet, *tell a lie, swim fast, hurt another puppet who hasn't or won't hurt her or someone she cares for,* or move quieter than a finger puppet.

Once an actor has done all of the above, he or she is ready to play.

Playing a puppet

The examples of play given above should make it clear how a game of *Puppetland* is played. Interactions are adjudicated entirely by the puppet master, using the attributes of the puppets involved as a guideline. For example, if a Nutcracker hurls a rock at Sally Red Buttons (described above) she can avoid it (as described in her 'This puppet can' attributes) if she sees it coming in time. Again, all such actions are at the puppet master's discretion, and they should serve the interests of the story as the third rule explained.

The jigsaw puzzle portion of the character sheet needs explanation. This is a large box with the outlines of a jigsaw puzzle within it, into which you draw the picture of your character. This particular jigsaw puzzle (every sheet is the same) has 16 pieces.

glide through the streets of
feetless forms moving swiftly
vengeful spirits."

During play, the actor fills in a piece of the jigsaw puzzle with a pencil or pen when certain things happen. These things are:

- When the puppet does something it shouldn't be able to do (if Sally Red Buttons told a lie, her actor would fill in a piece of the jigsaw puzzle).
- When something especially bad happens (if Sally Red Buttons was taken prisoner by the Nutcrackers and had one of her legs crunched off, her actor would fill in a piece of the jigsaw puzzle).

NOTE that 'bad' damage is still healed normally when the next tale begins like all other damage. However, filled-in jigsaw puzzles are never erased. They always remain filled in. Once all 16 pieces are filled in, the next time a tale ends the puppet never wakes up again. They are dead, and can no longer be played. Death is rare in *Puppetland,* but it is inexorable in its approach. The puppet master always determines when a puzzle piece should be filled in, and is always the final authority in this matter.

The Tales

Each *Puppetland* tale consists of the puppets doing their best to stop Punch, find the Maker's body (which Punch has hidden), and bring the Maker back to life with the Maker's tear saved by Judy when Punch killed him. In addition, the puppets have to protect Judy and her treasured freehold of Respite, and do everything they possibly can to save any more innocent puppets from the horrific ravages of Punch and his infamous Boys.

Tales may come from the mind of the puppet master, or may be instigated by actors who have a particular goal in mind and seek to go about achieving it. Typical tales might include:

- Dealing with one of the Boys, perhaps once and for all.
- Rescuing a puppet who has been targeted by Haunt.
- Stopping a cadre of Nutcrackers from finding Respite.
- Infiltrating Punch's palace to find the Maker.

Growing Pains

Puppetland is a game about children, and what happens to us as children. The gameplay is meant to create the kinds of stories that you find in a children's book, hence the insistence on in-game dialogue and narration throughout play. But because the elements in the setting are not exactly the sort of thing you usually find in childrens' books, I hope to enable players of *Puppetland* to get a closer, more detailed look at the realities of the childhood experience through childhood trappings, yet with an adult sensibility.

The world of the game is a world of innocence that has been corrupted. This is a timeless theme, and one that I hope has a lot of resonance for the game's participants. Actors in the game adopt the roles of childlike puppets – the kinds of folk who say things like, 'Gracious! The Nutcrackers are at the door!' The threats faced by the puppets are bizarre and often senseless, presented much as children perceive the world of danger that lies beyond the safety of their home and family setup.

Puppetland presents a story where a single adult (the Maker) has created a world in which children (the puppets) can live safely and happily. But the puppet Punch has entered adulthood, or rather he is trying to, and has usurped the rule of the Maker. Punch is an adolescent character, full of rage and confusion and the desire to strike out against figures of authority. Judy is also an adolescent, but has apparently followed a different path from that taken by her ex-lover.

The world described in *Puppetland,* then, is a world of childhood and innocence that has just begun to feel the pains of growing up. Maker's Land may well be a beautiful place, but all children grow up eventually and perhaps it is the destiny of Maker's Land to grow up too. Judy claims that the Maker's tear will restore everything to the way it was, but will it? That's really up to the puppet master. Perhaps Judy is mistaken, and the time has come for the inhabitants of Maker's Land to grow up now that their parent is gone. Perhaps Punch can be redeemed and transformed into a caring character. Perhaps Judy's correct, and Maker's Land is a golden world where no-one need ever grow up. The choice is yours.

That's the way to do it

An Internet-capable referee known as 'Cheese' asked me a number of questions about *Puppetland.* These might help to explain any potential complexities:

WHAT IS UP WITH MAGIC?
The Sally Red Buttons sample character can do magic tricks, but that's just meant to be sleight-of-hand stuff. Punch can work magic, by which I mean he can make living puppets from the Maker's skin and other kinds of alchemy-sorcery. I don't think he can throw fireballs or anything, but he can probably do sinister transformational stuff, such as turning a captured puppet into stone. It's more processes than weapons.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE OTHER SKILLS NOT MENTIONED HERE?
All the rules I've made up are included here. They're intended to be common sense things. What can a puppet do? That's what you need to ask yourself to figure them out.

HOW DOES JUDY RESTORE THE MAKER? DOES SHE JUST POUR THE TEAR ON HIS SKIN?
Presumably if you got Judy, the Maker and the tear all in the same place it would work itself out. I suggest that she has to pour the tear back into the corner of the Maker's eye – the tear would flow back into the Maker and restore him to life.

HOW BIG DO YOU FEEL *PUPPETLAND* IS?
I mean, is it the size of the world? Is it as big as a regular human-sized town? Are there mountains? How far from the real world is it?
I imagine *Puppetland* as being a human-sized city, only scaled down to puppet dimensions. But not a huge city – maybe a thousand puppets, maybe just a few hundred. It's meant to lay on the shore of a great lake of milk and cookies, ringed by mountains. Respite is on the far side. That's as much of the world as anyone knows about; if anyone goes up into the mountains, I'd rule that they hit the painted felt backdrop that forms the 'sky' of Puppetland. Part of me thinks that Maker's Land is actually a huge puppet stage/playland built by the Maker in the back of his shop, and that if a puppet cut through the felt sky backdrop and jumped out, he'd be in a dusty storeroom at the back of an abandoned puppet store, in a deserted Jewish ghetto in Germany circa 1941.

HOW DO THE CHARACTER INTERACTIONS GO?
A finger puppet is quick enough to dodge anything if it sees it straight away, so if a Nutcracker snuck up on it would the puppet know? I mean, how do you know if you hit someone with your hand, or is it just a 'well, it's pretty obvious that you might just do damage' referee's discretion.
Beats me. I meant for the game to be run pretty much freeform, taking the attributes of the puppets as guides to what might happen. So, I'd say that it amounts to a ref's fiat, modulated by the creativity of the players in verbalising their actions. You could potentially play it using *Everway* cards or tarot cards as a mediating device – for that matter you could roll dice, pick a number between one and ten if you like that kind of element. I presume that there won't be much hand-to-hand combat, instead it'll be stuff like, 'Let's push the big rock on top of the Nutcrackers!' I mean, imagine a bunch of puppets in a knock-down, drag-out fight – it's not a very compelling image. Hopefully, the players will find other more interesting solutions and the referee will be able to provide for them.

Love is never a simple affair, whether in real life or in your roleplaying campaigns, but one thing's certain – it's sure to get your players hot under the collar.

Ian O'Rourke tries not to blush.

Romance. All great stories have it, but it's a dramatic element that is missing from most campaigns. In a roleplaying game we try to create characters who are real people in the context of the gameworld, so why isn't romance a part of that? There is no plot hook more effective than the ties of love.

Here, meet Miss or Mr Perfect figure

Your mind is set, you want to give one or more characters the joy and pain of a romantic plot, but how do you do it? Slowly. The last thing you should do is present a player with the gameworld equivalent of Pamela Anderson or Brad Pitt and wink suggestively. If you do, the more mature-minded players will just shake their heads and talk about your ineptness in the pub the following night, and the less mature ones will either not respond at all or supply numerous embarrassing reactions.

You need a plan. The plan should not be a set of hard and fast rules, just some guidelines to give you the dynamics of the relationship. You should remain flexible, because character interaction between the romantic principles will soon change your outline. You should make a rough plan for the following stages of the romance:

- ❤ The chase
- ❤ The relationship
- ❤ The fall out

You should first choose a player – that shouldn't be problematic, almost any player will welcome a romantic plot, as long as the dynamics are right. A romance can range from an angst-driven affair to a love that manifests itself more as a deep friendship, such as that shared by Mulder and Scully in *The X-Files*. If the chosen player is prone to involved, deep roleplaying give him or her the angst option, while if the player is more action-orientated tailor a romance to be more like that of Han Solo and Princess Leia, or like any romance in the action genre – that is, slightly superficial.

The Thrill of the Chase

All relationships start with a chase, unless the characters involved have gone straight to stage two due to some cultural situation, such as an arranged marriage. One of the characters will have to pursue the relationship, and the difficulty of the pursuit depends on you or the player. Taking an example from the *Star Wars* trilogy, Han Solo was the one doing the pursuing until he was frozen in carbonite, at which time Leia realised her loss and became the pursuer by rescuing him from Jabba the Hutt. Once Han Solo was rescued they entered the relationship stage of the romance.

The choice is: will the player pursue the NPC or will it be the other way around? If the player pursues, you will have to design the NPC well, so that the player pursues the character out of his or her own free will. If the NPC pursues, things are slightly easier. Try to design the romance so a pursuit does occur, either by making the NPC resistant to the player's affections in the beginning, or by making the NPC repugnant to the player (if he/she is pursuing) until he/she knows him or her better. This barrier could exist to spice up the romance. A barrier could be cultural (such as a difference in race or species) or religious (the character could be a priest as in the Thorn Birds) and the personalities involved could be enemies who see something appealing in each other (such as with Batman and Catwoman), or one character may find the other personally unappealing in the first instance (as with Han Solo and Princess Leia). Keep the nature of the chase fluid and dynamic by changing the pursued and pursuer if you can, and this stage of the relationship could stay fresh for a long

"Once a player has survived assassination attempts he or she may be ready for more romance."

SCREEN ADDICTS

Anyone wanting to do a bit of celluloid research should check out the following movies and TV series: *Batman Returns, Cheers, Last of the Mohicans, Moonlighting, North and South, The Star Wars Trilogy, The Thorn Birds, The X-Files, While You Were Sleeping* and elements of just about every Hollywood movie ever made.

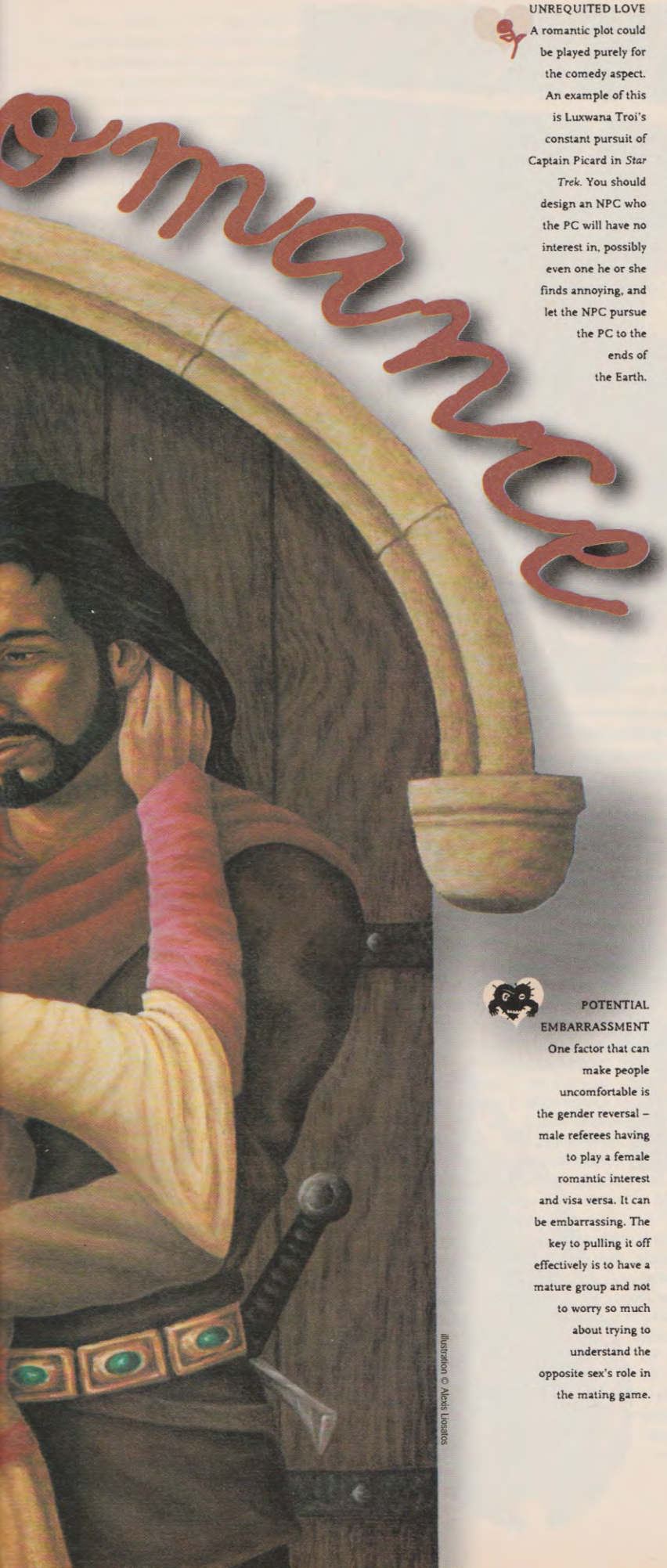


Illustration © Alexis Liosatos

UNREQUITED LOVE
A romantic plot could be played purely for the comedy aspect. An example of this is Luxwana Troi's constant pursuit of Captain Picard in *Star Trek*. You should design an NPC who the PC will have no interest in, possibly even one he or she finds annoying, and let the NPC pursue the PC to the ends of the Earth.

time, complete with a 1,001 plot hooks for the referee to use.

Together at Last

A romance plot need never move beyond the pursuit stage – for example, the beauty of the Batman and Catwoman relationship is that they are enemies and a wedge will always exist between them. If the relationship in your game does move beyond the chase, the two characters have acknowledged that they are an item. The key to keeping this stage fresh is to change the NPC slightly – it is entirely possible that the NPC may not be the same person once he/she has captured his/her prey. The NPC could become insanely jealous or possessive, or maybe he/she is not as exciting once he/she has settled down.

You should try to simulate some of the trials and joys of being in a relationship. You should also consider what strange rituals may have to be performed to acknowledge the union, especially when dealing with cross cultural relationships. Eventually, whether it is a month or a year in the campaign world, the NPC or the player will decide that the relationship is over, and at this point things may get nasty.

Don't Say It's Over

When a relationship starts to disintegrate, it can still provide just as many good roleplaying opportunities as the pursuit. In real life we have all read stories in magazines or heard of people who have ended a relationship only to have their car covered in battery acid, or for someone to have geared up the rumour mill. The trouble for the characters is that they tend to hobnob with people more powerful than us. Will a past lover become a powerful enemy? Even if the ex-lover is fine about the split, will some relation take it as his or her responsibility to punish the character for real or imagined transgressions? And does the ex-lover have information that would be fit for blackmail? This is most useful in political campaigns. Think of the problems in angering a *Star Wars* crime boss, or a Corporate in a *Cyberpunk* adventure.

In short, when the lovers split change the relationship's dynamics by analysing realistically how the NPC will react. Remember, if your players indulge in the love game with nobles, crime bosses and people who know 100 ways to kill someone with a toothbrush, they will have to take some sort of hit when it all goes sour. Once a player has survived assassination attempts, being thrown out of town due to vicious rumours, or weeks of going into a fugue state upon seeing a toothbrush, he or she may just be ready for more romance. Or maybe someone else did come along, and that is what caused his or her current problems.

The Bedroom Door

At some point the romance will blossom and, human nature being what it is, the two characters will consummate their relationship. This opens the issue of whether sex in your games is left at the bedroom door, or whether the act itself is described in some way.

> *"Think of the general mood and feeling that's involved, rather than the mechanics."*

The instant reaction from a lot of referees will be to leave sex to the imagination – that's a fine way handle it, and in many games it is the best option. In *Feng Shui* and other action-orientated games, referees and players should take relationships no further than a kiss and a witty comment under a hail of bullets. Your campaign genre may not be suitable for really intense relationships.

When playing more 'relationship intense' campaigns, the idea of providing some sort of in-game playing of the sexual encounters of romantic interests should not be dropped out of hand. The problem is that it is difficult to do well, and it should only be done with mature players. If you look at your players and feel they might be embarrassed, offended or take the proverbial, then do not even consider the idea unless you think you can enlighten them. Neither do you have to describe sexual acts in detail – think of the general mood and feeling that's involved, rather than the mechanics. It should be more akin to a romantic film's view of sex, not hard-core porn. When done well, it will intensify the relationship of the two characters, which is the whole point.

Love Interest

The key to maintaining an interesting romantic plot is to keep things fresh and fluid so you can capture the excitement of the idea. The romance should deepen both characters, providing you with a detailed NPC, while peeling away the character's personality to reveal secrets that the player will not have considered during design. It should also provide moments of humour and sadness, and plenty of opportunities for adventure. Your players will love it. Honest…

POTENTIAL EMBARRASSMENT
One factor that can make people uncomfortable is the gender reversal – male referees having to play a female romantic interest and visa versa. It can be embarrassing. The key to pulling it off effectively is to have a mature group and not to worry so much about trying to understand the opposite sex's role in the mating game.

THE LEGACY X GAMES

In 1984 you couldn't move for them, but by 1986 you couldn't find them for love nor money. Antony Johnston gets all dewy-eyed about superhero roleplaying games.

Superhero roleplaying is great fun. At its most basic it is fantasy wish-fulfilment. You can fly, be a hero, beat up the bad guys and get the girl. It enables you to tell a ripping yarn just for the sheer hell of it, without worrying too much about realism or coincidence. Superheroes have always been popular, but superhero RPGs have come and gone.

The superhero genre is universal and easy on the referee. He or she has no complex new political systems to learn, no books of monsters and strange races to memorise. The same goes for the players – no long-winded lessons on the history of the gameworld, no searching through the rules trying to find if a fireball is any use against a Hhroggothian Vomit Beetle. The world is ours, the governments are those around at the time, the international relationships are the current ones and even the laws of physics are (generally) the same. You simply roll your superhero and go.

The superhero is many things to many people. You can be a dark, tortured soul, agonising over the moral decay of the world, a golden boy who kisses babies and beats up bank robbers for breakfast, or even a fuzzy purple blob from Betelgeuse (don't laugh, I've seen this).

Illustration ©arcane by Steve Kyte

There's never a dull moment in a superhero game. The PCs are constantly at loggerheads with the official police (and a few secret MI5-like organisations to boot), trying to hold down day jobs and keep their real identities secret while being heroes. Then there are families to deal with, not to mention government legislation on superheroes and the feelings of Joe Public towards these super-beings – all this before they even think of fighting Dr Destructo and his evil World Domination Plot™.

JUMPING ON THE BANDWAGON

Soon after the release of *Marvel Super Heroes* and *DC Heroes* (see 'Old Favourites' below) the bandwagon hit the road. Suddenly everyone and their aunt Edna was releasing new superhero games and re-issuing old ones. *Champions*, the first really popular superhero system, was back in a shiny new edition, *GURPS Supers, Guardians, Villains & Vigilantes* – even *TWERPS* got in on the action with *Superdudes!* None of these games could draw on the resources of Marvel and DC, which forced them to focus more on the creation of original heroes, with varying degrees of success.

There was also a game called *Golden Heroes* from Games Workshop. I won't repeat myself here – you can order a copy of **arcane** 7 if you want to read my views on why *Golden Heroes* was top of the heap (see page 48 for back issue details). Suffice to say that it was British (with an ironic atmosphere), it was a clean system and it worked.

By 1985 the market was swamped and everyone was playing superheroes. Times were good. 'Okay,' you say, 'if they were so good, how come nobody plays them now?' Would you believe it's all the fault of an English guy who looks like Jesus?

In 1985 Alan Moore wrote *Watchmen*. A year later Frank Miller wrote *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, rewriting the caped crusader's history and bringing him up to date. The ball started rolling and was picked up by people such as John Smith *(New Statesman)*, Grant Morrison *(Zenith)* and Pat Mills *(Marshal Law)*. A new era of superhero comics was ushered in.

Now your aunt Edna was writing alternative superhero comics involving outcasts from society, their lives wrecked by adventuring – idealistic fools unable to cope with the Real World, taken advantage of by governments and the media. This new wave of superhero comics examined the motivations of a superhero – why would someone want to give up all their free time to fight crime and evil? Why not just use your powers to your own personal ends? Imagine how difficult it would be for a superhero to live in our world. The media attention, the ridicule. 'I was Captain Ectoplasm's love child!' Or, 'This week on Geraldo – superheroes. Social conscience, or a bad role model for our children?'

Old-style superheroes and their respective games soon became perceived as juvenile and naive. People wanted gritty realism and social relevance. The climate shifted dramatically, eventually settling where we currently are with our taste for dark, psychodramas and conspiracy theories (which is ironic, because currently *X-Men* is the best-selling comic in the western world). My opinion is that players simply couldn't be bothered to put in the effort. Superhero games can easily fit the modern style of gaming; the very fact that no two superheroes are the same gives enormous room for variety. So, want to play that tortured soul? Or how about becoming a gun-toting vigilante? No problem.

OLD FAVOURITES

So what did we used to play? Well, say 'superhero' and everyone thinks of Marvel. Surprise, surprise, say 'superhero RPG' and many still think of Marvel. *Marvel Super Heroes* from TSR wasn't the first superhero game, but it was the first big-budget release, and had an established fan base to draw on. The game had easy mechanics (one type of roll on one table resolved everything you wanted to do), and gave you the chance to play your favourite comic book hero. It sold boatloads.

Never to be outdone, DC Comics then licensed Mayfair games to produce the equally cryptically-titled *DC Heroes*. This had more complex, detailed mechanics, but benefited from a better, more balanced hero creation system (Marvel's was not so good).

Both games had good, solid backing and a wealth of pre-generated material to draw on, but there was a downside. Marvel and DC wanted you to play their established heroes, as shown in their comics. To this end they provided detailed stats of their most popular characters, but their systems for generating a new, original hero of your own devising were sketchy at best. Those wanting their own heroes tended to stick with *Champions*.

RESILIENT POWERS

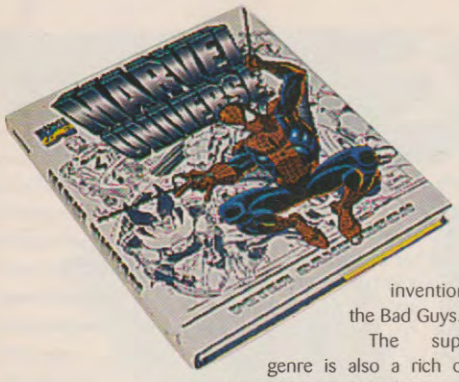
A superhero campaign is a springboard for other genres. It can leap (in a single bound) from horror to sci-fi and back again. Campaigns can even switch between genres, because the setting is determined by whatever the players are up against, and superheroes exist outside the normal framework of society. No matter what universe you're playing in, a superhero's powers are still, well, super. You could play a detective trail one game, then a horror theme, a political intrigue plot and even a fantasy game thanks to the wonders of time travel, interdimensional rifts and other nutty

WORTH BUYING

***Watchmen* (DC Comics, 1985) is set in an alternate 1985, where nuclear war is imminent and only one 'real' superhero exists. His powers have shaped the world, but as Armageddon approaches, he disappears.**

MONEY WELL SPENT

Highly recommended is *How to be a Superhero* by Mark Leigh and Mike Lepine (Penguin, 1990) – probably the funniest book in the universe.



> SUPERHERO ROLEPLAYING IS WISH-FULFILMENT. YOU CAN FLY, BE A HERO, BEAT UP THE BAD GUYS AND GET THE GIRL.

inventions of the Bad Guys.

The superhero genre is also a rich one for 'pure' roleplaying (whatever that might be). Most heroes have ridiculously complex backgrounds and webs of enemies, friends and colleagues to cause them problems. The potential for psychoanalysis and inner conflict is vast, not to mention tragedy as your hero becomes torn between attending his mother's funeral or flying to Japan to defeat Emperor Sushi.

You may have already noticed my rather tongue-in-cheek attitude – you don't have to take it seriously to enjoy it (although you can if you like). Yes, dressing up in funny costumes and posturing on rooftops is silly. Yes, there may be deep-rooted psychological reasons for wanting to beat up wrongdoers and hide behind a mask. But if you don't want to analyse those issues, you don't have to. It's a game, after all – but which system should you buy?

MORE WAYS TO SPEND MONEY

For more inspiration, the *X-Men* is the best example of a long-running team of disparate heroes, and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* is required reading for anyone wanting a darker tone.

WHAT SHOULD YOU BE PLAYING?

Unfortunately, *Marvel Super Heroes, DC Heroes* and *Golden Heroes* are all out of print. The only 'pure' superhero system still in publication is *Champions* for the *Hero* system.

If you've never played the *Hero* system before, it's a mite complex, and not recommended for beginners. If you have played it before, you've probably already got *Champions*. Personally, I don't like it – the old phrase 'buckets of dice' comes to mind – but if you want a pure superhero game it's the only one available at the moment. However, now that *Hero* has joined forces with R Talsorian and created the Fuzion system, a re-release of *Champions* with this new system is on the way. This can only be A Good Thing.

So what else can you do? Well, there's *GURPS. The Supers* sourcebook isn't difficult to find, but the system is, in my opinion, a little too realistic to lend itself well to superhero games. *Dream Park* from R Talsorian has a system for creating superheroes, but it isn't designed to be run as a superhero-only game. You could do it with a bit of work, but it's not ideal. Or there's the *D6* system from West End Games. This has a small section on superheroes which, frankly, you could write yourself if you're familiar with its *Star Wars* system. Perhaps the best bet is *Feng Shui* from Daedalus, which is already geared towards the superhero style of play, and would be easy to adapt, especially if you have a copy *Nexus*, which is compatible with the system. Oh, and let's not forget *TWERPS Superdudes*. Strictly for laughs, but the bad names alone are worth the asking price.

As you can see, this is not an ideal situation. You could of course design your own system, but you'd need a fairly trustworthy group, not to mention referee, to ensure game balance. The temptation to powergame when faced with an infinite variety of superpowers would just be too much for some people. So let's just assume that you have bought/borrowed/created a superhero game from somewhere. How do you run a campaign?

RUNNING ADVENTURES

What sort of adventures should you run? How long is a piece of kryptonite? As mentioned above, you really can put superheroes up against anything and it will still fit. It's in the nature of the job to be faced with a wide variety of foes. Anyone at all who can cause a problem for the heroes and/or society is a viable villain, be they a mad scientist, power-hungry magician, invading alien race, corrupt politician, galactic policeman or time-travelling barbarian. Anyone at all.

With the villains come the powers the heroes must defeat and the situations they will find themselves in. The mad scientist could operate from a remote, unmapped Pacific island

SUPER SOAPS

Another great source of ideas for superhero campaigns are soap operas. As we discussed in our feature about soaps in arcane 9, the type of character interaction that goes on in these shows is perfectly suited to roleplaying games, especially superhero campaigns.

CREATING YOUR TEAM

Firstly, get your players to design their heroes before you even think about scenarios. Many superhero adventures rely on one or more of the heroes possessing a certain power or ability – there's no point in designing a scenario where the villain's Achilles' heel is his susceptibility to psychic attacks if none of your characters have psi powers.

Try not to mix and match your characters' fundamental attitudes too much. Unless you're playing a comedy game it's probably not a good idea to have an Uzi-laden avenger of the night working alongside a team of merciful do-gooders. It may be interesting, it may even produce some top roleplaying, but the team isn't actually going to do much because its members won't want to work together. Sure, the group should disagree, sometimes strongly, on the best way to solve a problem, but the last thing you want is three heroes facing off against one another over the use of large-calibre weaponry.

All heroes should be able to hold their own in a fight, although this doesn't necessarily have to be with their fists – Jubilee from the *X-Men* is a good example of a physically weak character who can still wreak havoc in a scrap. But aside from fighting, each hero should specialise in something and complement the others' expertise. They should all be able to do something that can aid the group. This could be some kind of resource they're able to call on from their day job, a friend in the police force, a specialist area of knowledge or even just being filthy rich. All these things will help the team to varying degrees in different situations.

Try to make sure your heroes are diverse, too. This may sound obvious, but a good rule of thumb is not to let more than one character have the same truly unusual power. By all means let them all have super strength, flight, agility – the mundane superpowers – but anyone with a power such as teleport, energy blast, alien origins or whatever should be the only one in the team to possess this particular power. This is more to do with drama than balance; it makes the players feel unique and special, and means that each hero is more crucial to the team.

Are your heroes a 'proper' team? How are they organised? Do they have a base with facilities they can all access? Are they on good terms with the police, and do they have access to their records? Perhaps they were assembled by a covert government organisation, such as DICE in *Golden Heroes*. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they might meet every so often atop Tower Bridge and only work together on the toughest problems.

the players must find. The power-hungry magician lives in a wizard's tower guarded by supernatural denizens and magical wards. Thwarting an alien invasion might mean a trip to their homeworld or a battle onboard a mothership. Dealing with a politician will mean lots of detective work and double-bluffing. And a time-travelling barbarian might take the PCs back with him…

When setting up any kind of superhero campaign, there are a few basic guidelines to bear in mind. Unless your world is packed to brimming with superheroes, the PCs should elicit extreme reactions wherever they go. How they put themselves across and their general attitude will determine the reaction they get; anarchic, gun-toting avengers may find they receive the cold shoulder from any form of authority (although the tabloids will probably love them). On the other hand, heroes who are polite and merciful (for which read: don't batter their foes to a pulp) may be seen as untrustworthy by the public, but will probably move in political circles more easily. And, of course, anyone with the merest hint of magic or psionics will be regarded by the masses as a freak and probably a devil-worshipper.

Running the campaign can be as simple as you and your players want it to be. Certainly the easy way out is to simply throw new, unconnected problems at the heroes week after week, which can be solved with a minimal amount of thinking and a maximum amount of fighting. But it can be devilishly complex, too. You could start by focusing on the hero's personal lives – not just by having their aunt Edna kidnapped by the bad guys, but introducing love interests, problems at work and breakdowns of friendships. Then try throwing a few investigative adventures their way, in which brain must beat brawn. Give them an arch-villain who pops up every third session with another plot to enslave the world.

Probably the best way to do this is to have a thread running through the campaign, with a single person or organisation behind it. The players might not even know of the antagonist's existence at first, but over time they may begin to suspect that someone is behind a whole host of apparently unrelated events – the same M.O. at different crime scenes, or a calling card left behind. Gradually they come to realise that all these smaller events are constituent of a larger whole.

From small seeds…

Here's an example. Four different robberies take place over a month. These seem to be fairly routine crimes: truckloads of metal, a payroll van, a government courier and finally an electronic components factory. One of these should be worked through by the players, where they encounter Psyche, a powerful psychic who has erased the guard's memories. Psyche should manage to escape, with or without the stolen goods. Nothing more is said and the heroes continue with their 'normal' activities.

But then there's a break-in at a local nuclear power plant and radioactive material is stolen. When the team investigates it finds the security guards have indeed had their memory of the events erased. Now the heroes have a larger goal, without even knowing who is behind this plot or what its purpose is.

This is all the work of Doctor Strontium, the evil mad scientist, and his sidekick Psyche, who are building a giant radiation cannon with which to threaten the world. Further complexities could be Dr Strontium's government influence, or the revelation that Psyche is the separated-at-birth sibling of one of the heroes. Build up your plot over time and the players will appreciate it all the more when the final solution is reached.

Superheroic games are so much fun. If you don't already have one, don your cape and mask, fly/teleport/catch a 37 to the nearest game convention or store that stocks second-hand games, stride up to the counter and say: "I come in peace, law-abiding tradesman. I wish to purchase a copy of *Golden Heroes* from your good self. If this vexes you, I shall settle for *Marvel*. And if you're really stuck I'll consider *DC*." Alternatively, you could find a crumbly like me who bought them the first time round…

Choosing a game setting

Your setting is important. It's a good idea to base it somewhere you are either familiar with (your home town or nearest city is ideal) or have no knowledge of whatsoever.

Campaigns based in your hometown lend a more realistic edge to your games. Your players will be able to envisage their surroundings with ease and will probably gain some satisfaction from foiling a plot to destroy the local university (depending on how they feel about it, of course). You can subtly alter real places and real people, use existing companies as a front for some evil organisation, or have the PCs meet in the (locked) back room of a local shop.

Setting your game somewhere you've never been has equal benefits. You can make things up off the top of your head and no-one can contradict you, enabling you to take liberties with street layout and general geography to your advantage. The atmosphere of a real place such as, say, New York, is well known; even though you or your players may never have been there everyone has a feel for what it is probably like, clichéd though that may be.

Next you have to decide just how common superheroes are in this world of yours. If people can't walk down the street without witnessing a battle between two super-powered beings, their attitude will be jaded. The arrival of a hero won't phase them and the media will probably largely ignore them. On the other hand, if there are only a few dozen in the country (or even the world), seeing a superhero will be a major event in most people's lives and will garner an atmosphere of enigma and mystique, somewhat akin to UFO sightings.

MAKING A COMEBACK?

1997 may prove to be the year that the superhero game makes a comeback. The new Fuzion-powered version of *Champions* is on the way, and Pinnacle Entertainment is already working on a game based on the *Wildstorms* series of comic books.

YOU CAN BE A TORTURED SOUL, A GOLDEN BOY WHO KISSES BABIES, OR A FUZZY BLOB FROM BETELGEUSE.

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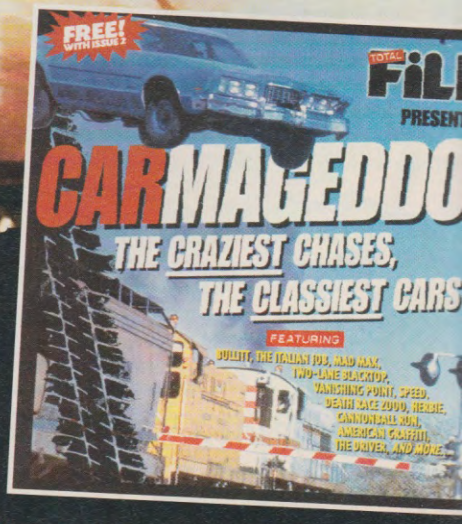
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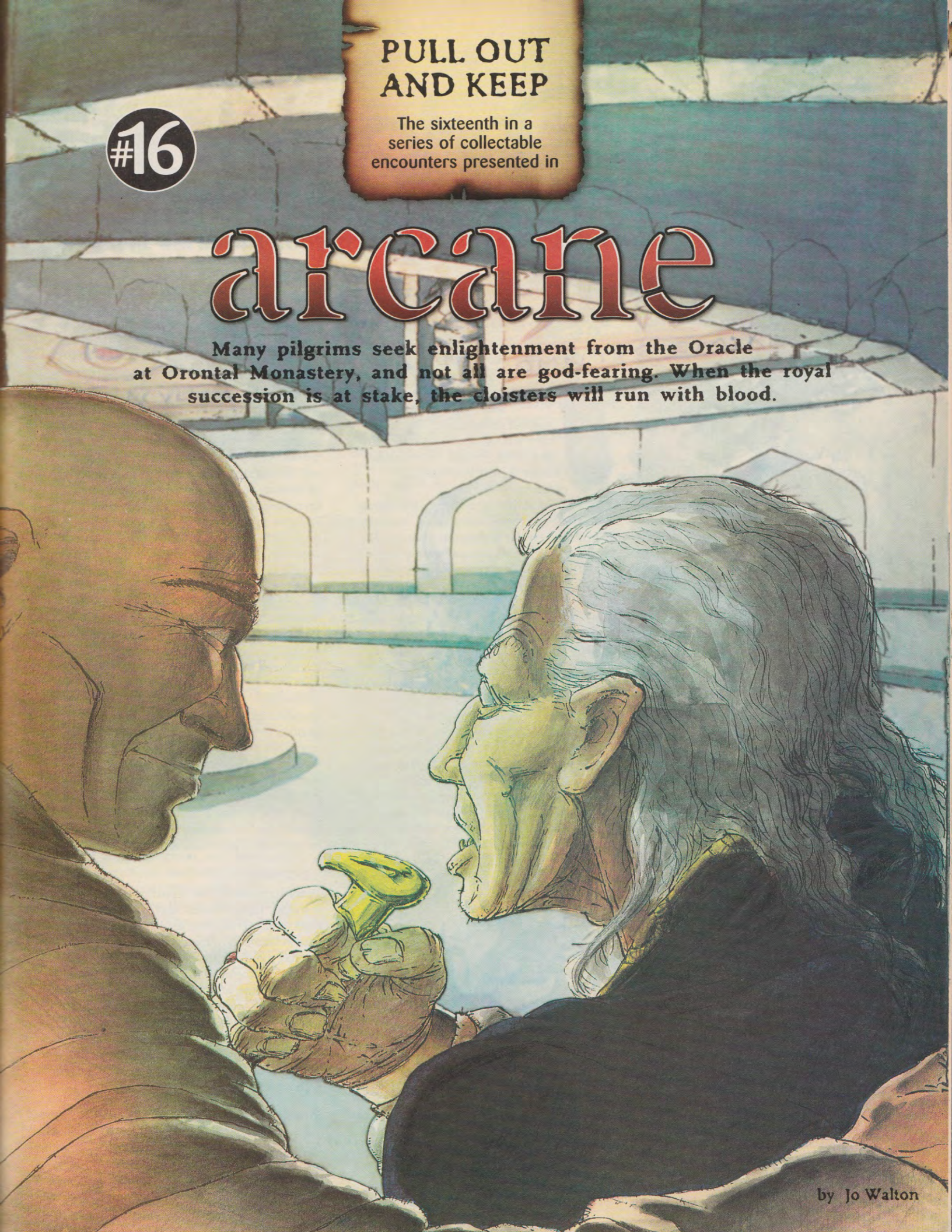
PULL OUT AND KEEP

The sixteenth in a series of collectable encounters presented in

#16

arcane

Many pilgrims seek enlightenment from the Oracle at Orontal Monastery, and not all are god-fearing. When the royal succession is at stake, the cloisters will run with blood.



by Jo Walton

Orontal M

In this month's sinister encounter we walk silently arou

Brother Taris maintained his smooth glide towards the strangers, not allowing anything of his perturbation to show. Who they were and how they had come here were questions which must wait. For now this must seem to be a perfectly ordinary meeting, as if they were as expected as any other visitors. He paused before them, only now allowing his eyes to travel over their fine but travel-worn clothing, their weary but nevertheless indisputably noble faces.

"Welcome to the monastery of Orontal. Are you seeking shelter, do you wish to consult the library, or have you come to ask a question of Lord Oron?"

The man hesitated, glanced at the woman as if for permission to speak. Interesting, thought Taris. She nodded.

"We have a question." The man's voice was harsh. "A private question. We would like to see the Oracle." Taris nodded smoothly. Many came with their questions, and the donations of nobles were always large. Lord Oron had a reputation for giving the right answer. But few came whose coming had not been predicted. Such few had a reputation for being trouble.

"Do not speak inside the monastery except as you ask your question." Taris cautioned. He turned away, gliding back up the path towards the Oracle chamber. They followed. He led them through the cloister, passing a few white-robed brothers and sisters going about their business.

He paused at the entrance of the chamber to let them gape for a moment. It was an impressive sight. The mother-of-pearl lining on the arches of the domed semicircle glimmered in the candlelight. The rows of marble seats were empty now, where the whole community gathered nine times a day to praise Lord Oron. The well itself, central to the room, shone brightly. All the stone was white. The figure of Sister Jameril kneeling beside it, robed in black, was the only darkness in the huge room. Although he longed to hear their question, Taris stepped back into the cloister as Jameril began the ritual by dipping the holy patena towards the water of the well. He closed the door. Nevertheless he did hear the question. Everyone did. Whether by some trick of the echoes or some act of Oron the words rang out loud and clear.

"Tell me, Lady, who is the rightful heir to the kingdom?"

A monastery is a place of religious retreat from the world, where people gather together to worship. Monasteries are homes of scholars who may have valuable knowledge, sometimes including magical information. They may have schools and hospitals, and they often provide the religious centre for the surrounding community to use.

A monastic community is a group of people which has deliberately cut itself off from society for a religious purpose. The precise nature of this purpose varies. It may be contemplation, divination or doing good works, but it is a religious purpose and not a purely secular one. What distinguishes a monastic community from any other is the combination of this religious purpose with the deliberate choice of the members. Members of the community choose to enter it, renounce the secular world and take vows to remain a part of their chosen community. Nobody is born a monk or a nun, it is a vocation knowingly chosen.

Monasteries tend to be fixed monastic communities, where people have gathered together to worship outside of society. Members often wear distinctive clothing and swear particular vows. Monasteries may be individual houses with no ties to anything outside their own walls, alternatively they may be part of an order of houses with mother, sister and daughter communities where individual members may be sent. Other houses of the order may be far away – visiting such a community is a good reason for a member of a usually stable monastic order to be travelling.

The Work of a Monastery

Monks and nuns take part in regular religious services and work hard the rest of the time. This work varies depending on the nature of the house and the divinity. Many monasteries preserve knowledge by copying out manuscripts in the Scriptorium. Many set up schools to teach local children. Some keep hospitals, or hospices for the dying. In addition to this exterior work there is the work of the community: tending the hives, gardens and fishponds which provide food for the members, making cloth and sewing habits and keeping the buildings clean. Some communities divide their novices into 'choir' and 'claustral' with labour done only by claustral or lay members of the community, leaving the choir members free to use their talents elsewhere.

Healing

Monasteries often provide free or cheap healing to members of the community. PCs who need healing provide a good excuse to drop in on a monastery. Sometimes a particular god, monastery or religious order will have a reputation for healing, or for being able to cure a specific disorder. Disorders of this nature can provide a reason to travel to a particular monastery.

Learning

Many monasteries are repositories of learning. Their libraries may contain rare books, and certain monks or nuns may be wise scholars. Some orders let visitors consult the library – for a price. Others may only allow the devout to have access to books. Getting around an awkward monk who doesn't want to let you read his books can be difficult. Reading the card catalogues – which may well be kept in a holy language unknown to strangers, or even in a whole other alphabet – can be a challenge for those without help.

Combat

There are some eastern traditions of orders of fighting monks who learn special

The System

You'll notice that, even though we present character descriptions for the people involved with Orontal Monastery, we don't provide you with any stats. That's a deliberate decision – you're supposed to be able to use this encounter with all manner of suitable games, and there's no way we could provide stats for all of them. That shouldn't be a problem for you – just make up the stats for these characters yourself, using the descriptions as a starting point. Same goes for other 'system' details – make them up to fit your campaign.

Monastery

he mysterious cloisters of Orontal Monastery.

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meditation and combat techniques. Any monastery that specialises in this has a practice yard, or they might fight in the cloister. The particular ritual and unusual form of fighting is considered a religious practice, and they are extremely reluctant to teach the system to outsiders. They might do this with a good reason, however. A novice who has left such a monastery might have learned the system, and this can be a good way to give a monk or ex-monk PC or NPC martial arts abilities.

The Oracle

The Oracle answers questions. It is of course up to the referee how accurate the answers are. In any case they should always be obscure. One good way of generating oracular answers is to use scraps of real poetry – late T.S. Eliot is very good for this, almost any two lines from *Four Quartets, Ash Wednesday* or *The Hollow Men* makes a good oracular pronouncement. If you want to give the players information, think in advance of effective ways of putting it. The information should be understandable (if you want it to be), but also gnomic and atmospheric. Even if you want them to have the information and the answer is simple, give it an oracular feel. Refer to places by poetic names, but keep it recognisable.

Calling somewhere The Place of Two Trees, or the City of the Red Rock can work if they will recognise that. Or it can work if they don't but will later – "As you enter the city you see a huge red rock to the side of the gate engraved with names." "This must be the City of the Red Rock the Oracle mentioned!" This can also be an effective and interesting way to insert some history into the campaign.

Always look carefully at their question and answer it specifically, rather than answering the question they meant to ask. Remember that even though the Oracle tells the truth as it understands it, the

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Sister Jameril

Sister Jameril is a young woman only a few years out of her novitiate, fully committed to the community, to Lord Oron and to the Oracle. She is specialising in being an Oracle. Jameril has no skill in interpreting Oracles at all, but can give voice to them fluently when Lord Oron speaks through her. She has plain features, which is all that can be seen of her because her dark habit hides everything else. She wears a pearl on a chain, and fiddles with it when she is nervous. Since the incident with the strangers she looks perpetually guilty. She knows, of course, what Oracle she gave them, but she has been forbidden to speak of it and is reluctant to trust anyone sufficiently to do so. When she is giving an Oracle her face seems to glow with reflected light and her voice becomes much more confident and certain. She is graceful and strong from practising the appropriate sacred dances of Lord Oron, but although fairly robust Jameril does not fight. If threatened she appeals to Brother Taris or any other nearby brothers. Her art offering is usually a poem.

Quote: "It isn't me who gives the Oracles, it's Lord Oron speaking through me."

interpreting monks need not. If they ask something absurdly general, make the answer reflect that.

Using the Oracle

Anyone wishing to consult the Oracle is taken to the Oracle chamber at the appropriate time. How often this happens can vary, but it should not be too frequent – it can be anything from once a day to once a month. The monk or nun whose turn it is to do duty as the Oracle dips the patena into the well and offers water to the person bringing a question. Both should drink. If the PC refuses to drink then the Oracle says, "Those who scorn to drink shall thirst" and refuses to say anything more. When they have drunk the question is asked, and the Oracle rocks to and fro until struck by an answer, which is spoken aloud. It may be quite a long extemporised poem, or just a few words. The Oracle him or herself refuses to say any more. There are, however, monks and nuns who specialise in interpreting the words of the Oracle and help (or not) the party to understand. They may have agendas of their own and can certainly use the knowledge gained themselves.

some oracular pronouncements:

Q Where is the treasure hidden?

A Cold glints the gold in the deep dark grave, eyeless in honour are those who save the sword that lies in the pale king's hand, in the rowan's shade near the dark sea strand.

Q When will I die?

A On a Thursday.

Q At what time?

A When the sun goes down and the day is done, when your guard is down and the enemy has won.

Q Who is my enemy?

A Two birds sat on a rock, squabbling over a snail. Then the rock started to shake.

Q Where is Mr. X?

A Far he lies, beyond the sea, his cold hands clutching a flowering tree. On a cliff, near the port where his ship once lay.

Q How do we defeat the dark lord?

A Not by force and not by stealth, not by any one means alone lies the road to the lonely throne.

Officers of the Monastery

The head of the monastery is called an Abbot or Prior. The person in charge of finances and supplies is the Cellerer. The Sacristan looks after the holy objects, and the Infirmarian cares for the sick. The Scriptorian's duties involve looking after the library and organising the copying of manuscripts. The Precentor is in charge of the choir, and the Zelator looks after the training of novices.

Community Organisation

The Abbot is theoretically in charge of the monastery and indeed has the final say on all decisions. Generally, all important decisions are debated by all of the officers, and very important decisions may be debated by the whole community. These debates always take place in the monastery's Chapter House.

Brother Litnik

Brother Litnik is a fat, doleful man who does most of the cooking. He has been at the monastery since he was a young man. His white robes are often stained with flour or splattered with juices from his cooking, because he spends most of his time in the kitchen. It is a matter of great sadness to him that he has never been able to learn to read, and so cannot worship Lord Oron by copying manuscripts or creating divine works. He makes up songs and poems – his extemporised verses and tunes are sometimes very good, although never, of course, written down or remembered. Most of the poets of the community laugh at him. He is horrified at the events and does his best to aid the party. He does not know anything except about what has happened in the kitchen and general gossip. He is representative of the majority of the community who are simple, devout people who want nothing more than to worship their god in peace.

Quotes: "So I thought I'd make pigeon pie and try to cheer people up, but it doesn't seem to have worked."

"The grit falls in the oyster as we fall in the world, and a life can be a work of art just like the grit is pearled. Lord Oron, smile upon us and help us day by day to make us live the best we can as pearls and not as clay."

(monks' refectory)

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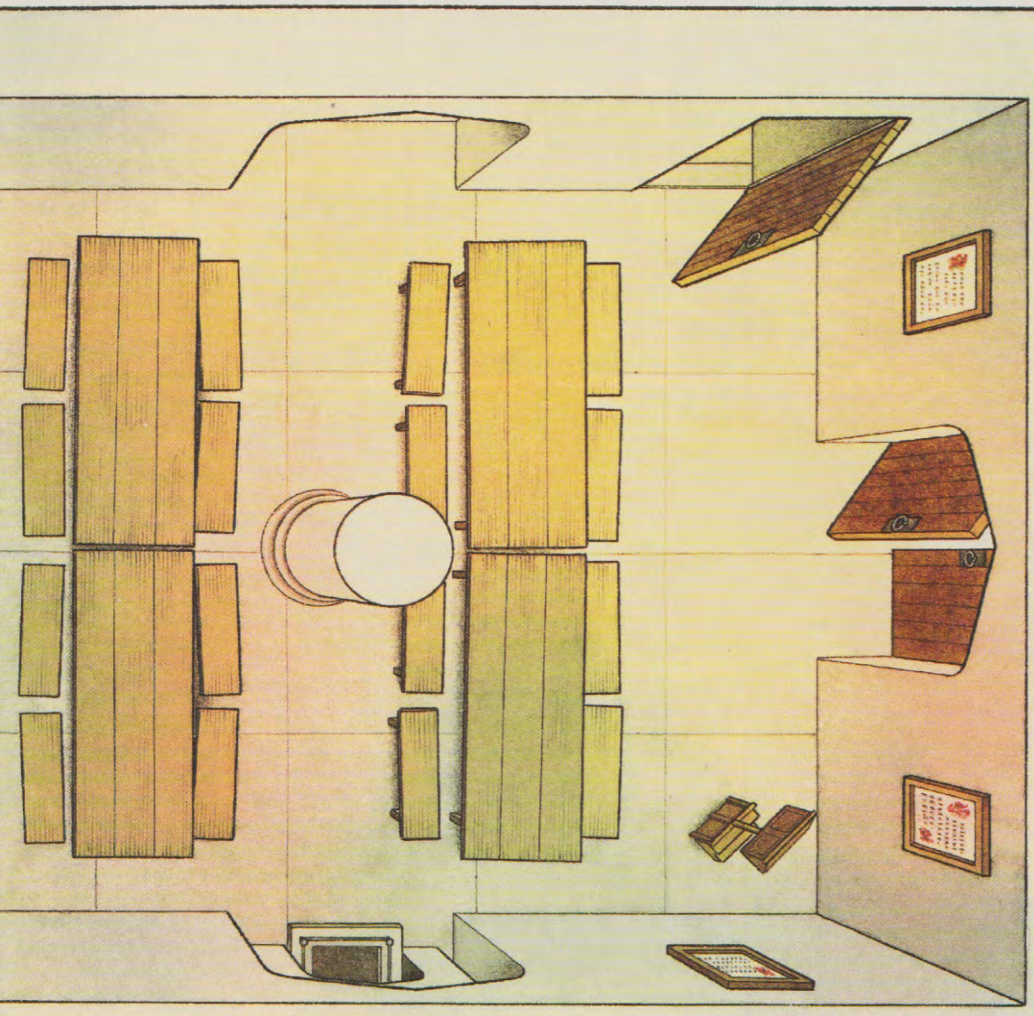

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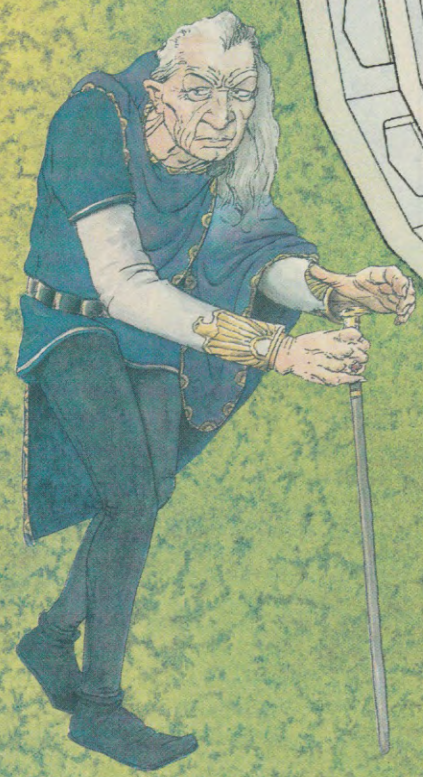
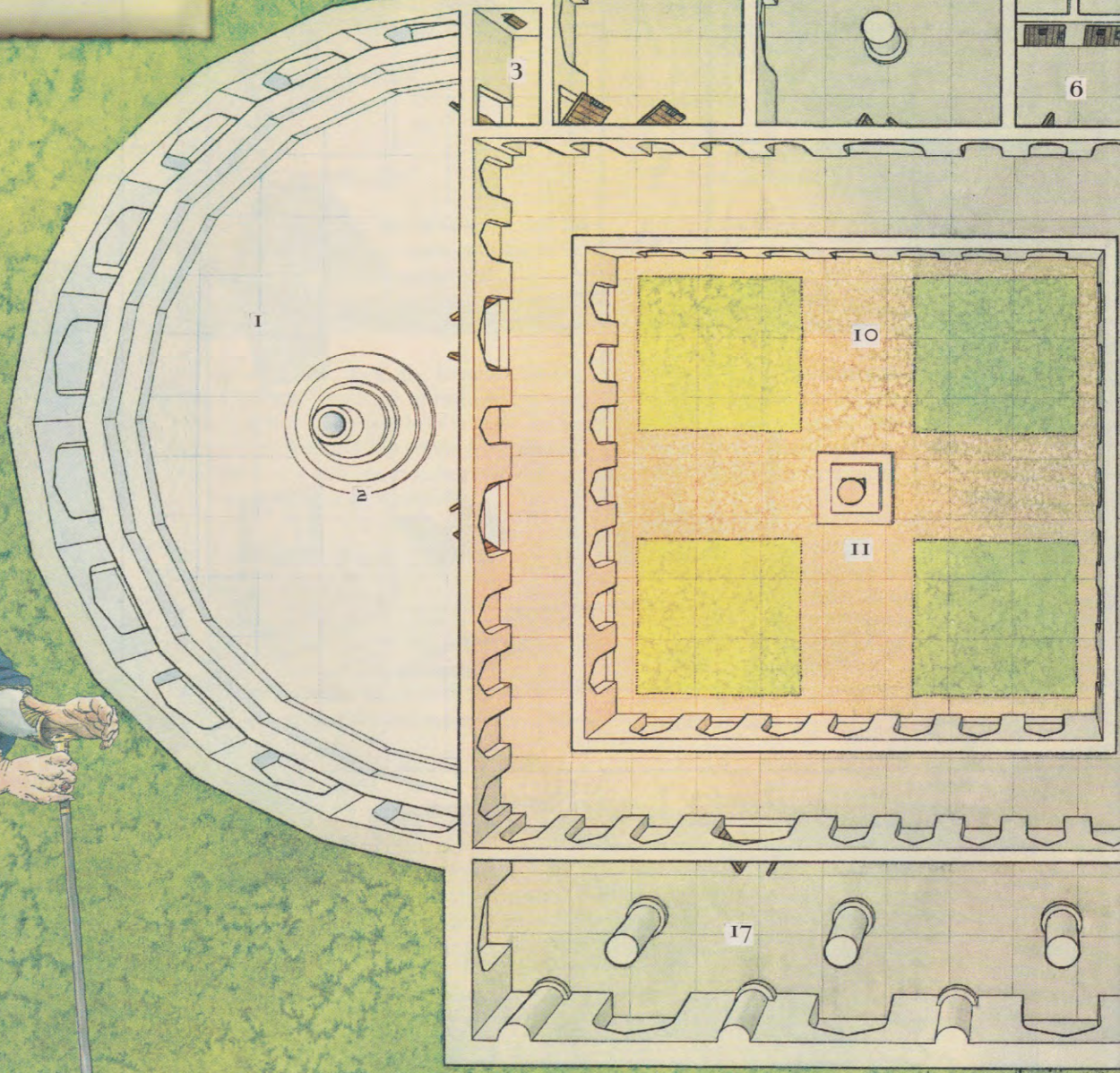
But the prince of the kingdom of persia withstood me one and twenty days: but, lo, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me; and I remained there with the kings of persia.

Now I am come to make thee understand what shall befall thou people in the later days: for yet the vision *is* for *many* days.

1 oracle chamber
2 well
3 Abbot's room
4 Library and scriptorium
5 chapter House
6 prison
7 garderobe
8 Dorter (dormitory)
9 Novices' day room
10 cloister





Orontal Monastery Overview

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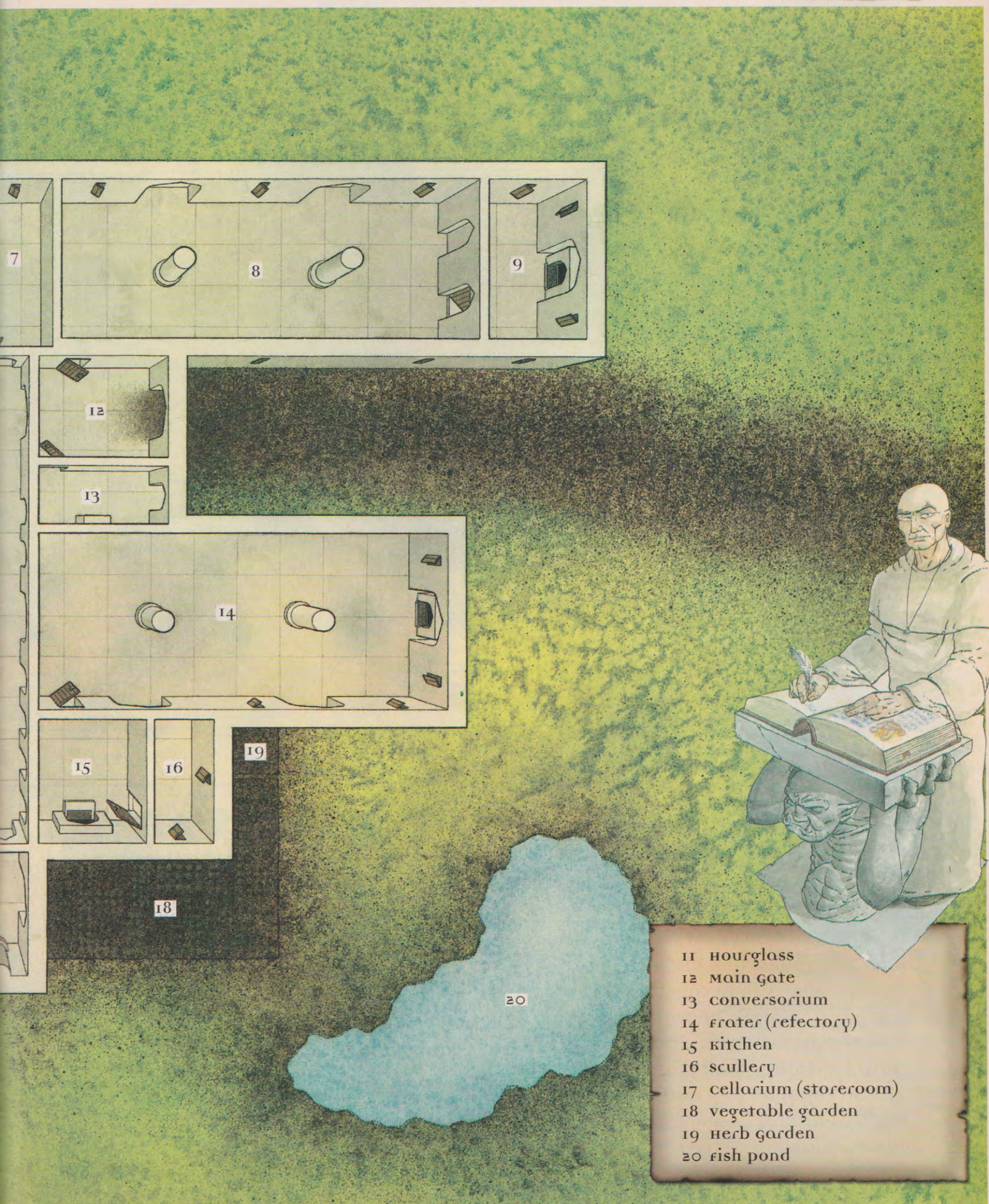

11 hourglass
12 main gate
13 conversorium
14 frater (refectory)
15 kitchen
16 scullery
17 cellarium (storeroom)
18 vegetable garden
19 herb garden
20 fish pond

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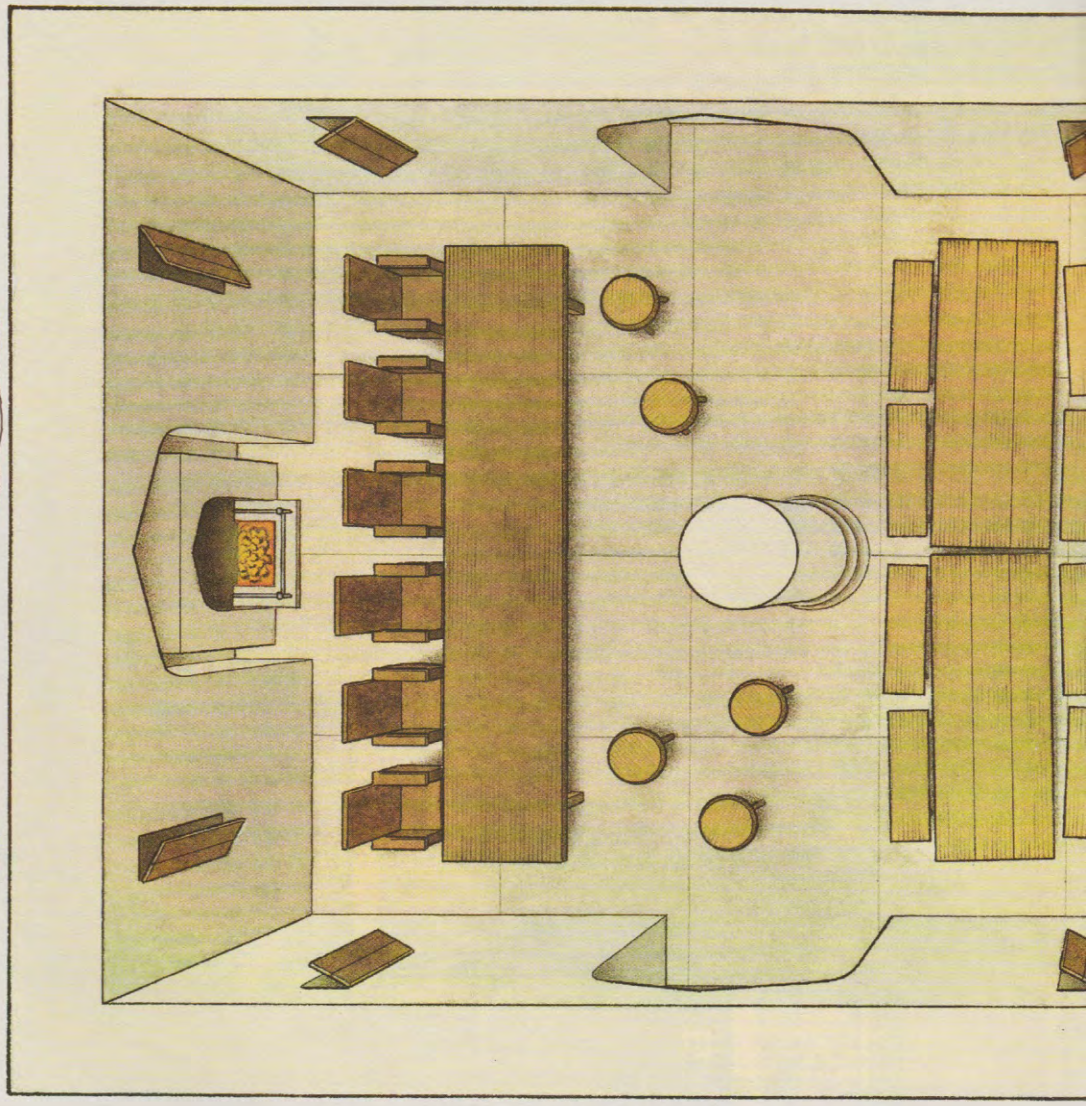
Orontal Frater



And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet, and *have* a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be third ruler in the kingdom.

Behold, he cometh with the clouds: and every eye shall see him, and they *also* which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.

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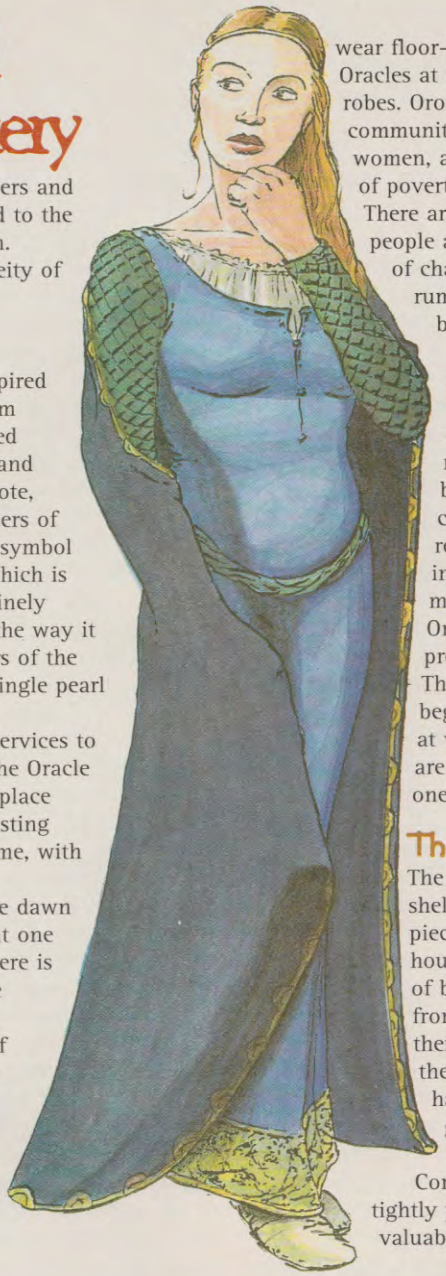
Orontal Monastery

Orontal has 60 brothers and sisters. It is dedicated to the minor god Lord Oron. Oron is the patron deity of inspiration, which includes oracular divination and also poetry and other inspired work. The Scriptorium contains an unrivalled collection of poetry and many paintings of note, some done by members of the community. The symbol of Oron is a pearl, which is considered to be divinely inspired because of the way it is made. All members of the community wear a single pearl around their necks.

There are nine services to Oron every day, in the Oracle Chamber. They take place every three hours, lasting half an hour each time, with an extra service immediately after the dawn service, meaning that one lasts for an hour. There is an hourglass of pure white sand in clear glass in the centre of the cloister, which it is the duty of the novices to keep turned on time.

Novices wear short white robes and full members wear floor-length ones. There are six Oracles at Orontal, and they wear black robes. Orontal is a mixed celibate community. It contains men and women, all of whom have taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. There are occasional scandals when people are caught breaking the vow of chastity, and more frequent rumours that various people are breaking it.



The main purpose of the community is praising Lord Oron. The services do this, as does caring for the monastery and keeping it beautiful. In addition the choir monks and nuns are required to create an inspiration piece of poetry, music or painting every year. Only the best of these are preserved in the Scriptorium. There is a festival at the beginning of spring every year at which these artistic offerings are presented and the inferior ones destroyed.

The Scriptorium

The Scriptorium is full of shelving where the presentation pieces of art are displayed. It also houses an enormous collection of books and art; many people from the local region have left their libraries to Lord Oron, and their art as well, and most of it has ended up here. Gifts from grateful questioners are also stored in the Scriptorium. Consequently, the shelves are tightly packed with all manner of valuable art treasures.

The Scriptorium also contains all the necessary materials for the production of art. This includes desks, ink, pens and copying materials for the production of scrolls and illuminated manuscripts. It also extends to sculptural tools, clay for modelling and easels for painting. There are no musical instruments stored here, however, except a few extremely valuable pieces which are artworks in their own right.

Much of this artwork is extremely valuable and would fetch a high price on the open market. It requires an expert eye to tell this from the pieces recently made by the novices and awaiting destruction at the beginning of spring.

Lady Suthis

Lord Suth's daughter, Suthis, is a beautiful girl – at least to all appearances. In fact her beautiful face is a mask which magically mimics her actual expressions but makes her look attractive. She is a vain and silly girl who does what her father tells her to do because she is afraid that he will reveal her secret. She is looking for a husband. Anyone well-born, well-connected and not too bright makes an ideal target for Suthis' flirting. She has no skills at all, except for her savoir faire, and her ability to dance and get by in high society. Being insecure she resorts to name-dropping to emphasise her importance and connections. She finds the religious community quaint, unusual and slightly intimidating.

Quotes: "Then the Prince asked me if I'd like another chocolate. He knows how I love them."

"Are your parents well connected?"

Sister Sisal

Sister Sisal is the Scriptorian. She is a tall, severe woman in her late fifties, with pale, watery blue eyes and grey hair. She wears the same robes as other members of the community, but adds to them a belt dangling with huge pockets suitable for carrying pens, keys and books. Having been at the monastery since she was a teenager, Sister Sisal was drawn here by her love of books and fine art. She is in charge of the collection and knows it all extremely well. Not only does she recognise the outside of the books, she knows their contents and spends all her spare time reading. She and one assistant spent ten years cataloguing the art treasures. This work included one trip to the capital for a particularly obscure statuette to be identified. It was found to be valueless, but it still forms part of the collection. This trip is the only time Sister Sisal has left the monastery (perhaps even the Scriptorium!) since she took her vows. She spends a large part of each day copying manuscripts. She also teaches this skill to the novices. If approached by people with a love of books and art, who are accepted in the community and have a desire to see the collection or look up information in the books, she is reserved but friendly. Anyone who is genuinely a scholar and can impress this fact upon her may even see her rare smile. She is actively hostile to anyone who is loud, rude, clumsy or does not show the proper respect for her room and work. People who get on the wrong side of Sister Sisal have difficulty finding anything they want in the collection, even if they are allowed to use it.

Quotes: "Please wash your hands before consulting the books, and maintain silence in the Scriptorium."

"I believe there might be something about the lost treasure of the Dragon Frith in the sixth volume of the life of Mikal of Joruntha. Let me find it."

Lord Suth

Lord Suth has come from the court to discover what has happened to the earlier visitors and to ask a question of his own. He is an elderly man with greying hair and beady black eyes. Suth is weak but strong willed, and is determined to discover anything of interest for himself and use it to enhance his position at court. He travels with an entourage including his beautiful daughter Suthis and many guards, but has no time for anyone employed by any other faction at court or upstart strangers. He is sarcastic and scathing, and does not suffer fools gladly. Lord Suth carries a swordstick and wears fashionable clothes.

Quotes: "My family has been worshipping Lord Oron since before your ancestors evolved from frogs. Get out of my way."

"Do you dare to address a remark to my daughter? The insolence! Guards – arrest this man."

Scenario Seeds

Treasure? What Treasure?

After the party members consult the Oracle about the location of some particular treasure they are seeking, they are delayed at the monastery by rumours of bad weather, or because it is unlucky to travel on a feast day. When they reach the place the Oracle told them about, they discover that strange priests have been there before them.

The Monastery Campaign

A monastery can be treated exactly like a covenant in *Ars Magica,* and form the basis for a fixed base campaign. PCs can be the officers of the monastery, or they could begin as novices dealing with their superiors and being sent out on troublesome errands. This can be taken seriously or done rather like a boarding school campaign using the *Skool Roolz* system described in **arcane** 3 – see page 48 if you missed it.

If done seriously the best approach is to have time when all goes as it should and experience is built up, interspersed with occasional adventures when dangerous strangers come to ask questions of the Oracle, or when there is some crisis. Some suitable crises could be the death of the Abbot and the election of a new one, the giving of an Oracle which seems to contradict some basic tenet of the faith, or demands that the party takes some unwelcome information to a powerful lord somewhere else, the arrival of unwelcome visitors, or demonic problems in the surrounding countryside which need to be exorcised. It could be a change of religious policy on the part of the king leading to a dissolution of the monasteries, or seizing the land and evicting the occupants who then have to find alternative ways to make a living.

Dark Monks

There is a community where all is not as it seems. On the surface the monks are worshipping a pleasant god – but why do so many people disappear in the district, their murdered bodies to be discovered much later? And don't forget, a monastery can be an effective cover for a group of vampires or demon worshippers. Anyone visiting such a community will find the outward forms all met, but things are quite different around the edges, and some peculiar things happen in the monastery after dark.

Healing

The party comes to the monastery for healing or even resurrection of one of its number. The Abbot agrees to do it, but refuses to accept gold in return, demanding instead three favours. These three favours can consist of anything and take some considerable time to fulfil. They could be simple quests, such as finding a certain item and returning it to the monastery. They could be pledges, such as refraining from buying new weapons until enough money has been raised to build a new roof. They could even be demands of virtuous conduct. This can be a way of restraining a party from excesses. However, it only works once, if at all.

Appearing in the Monastery

The PCs flee through a gate from another world and find themselves stepping out of a full-length mirror in the Scriptorium of Orontal monastery. From the party members' point of view, wherever they were expecting to emerge it wasn't a room cluttered with books and art objects. From the monastery's point of view, the mirror has been there for many years – it is considered an art treasure and nobody has any idea that it is actually a gate. Indeed, gates to other worlds may be considered sheer superstition. This can be a lead into the Sickness of the Pearl adventure detailed on the right. Or it can lead to the party being acclaimed as emissaries of Lord Oron, or of the devil.

Sister Sisal is completely horrified at their unexpected arrival, which causes her to blot an illuminated letter 'M'. The rest of the community may be frightened, fascinated or out to use the party for their own advantage. Brother Taris insists that the party members stay at Orontal, at least long enough for him to ask a question of the Oracle about Lord Oron's intentions in bringing them into this world. How this goes depends on what world the monastery is in. In a world with Law and Chaos, Oron is definitely on the side of Law, and it might work well to have the players slowly realise that they are, in fact, on the side of Chaos.

Fighting Order

The party members may spend time at the home of a fighting order while one of their number trains in the fighting technique. They may be expected to work for their keep while they are there, and generally encounter clashes of culture with the monks. They may have to explain their quest, possibly making it sound much more important than it actually is. When they leave, one of the monks, far more skilled in their esoteric combat skills than any of the PCs, decides to come with them to keep them honest. This can be a way of introducing a new PC, or it can be a way of taking an adventure in a different direction.

The Adventure

The Sickness of the Pearl

Two noble strangers came to the monastery of Orontal, seeking to discover the rightful heir to the kingdom. They received an answer and left, but were murdered before they reached home again. The party has been sent to discover what the answer was. The party may be employed by any of the factions at court who want to know who their heir is, or by the old dying king; they may be investigating in their own right, or they may just stumble into the situation by arriving at the monastery just after these events. Alternatively, they may be sent by one of the possible heirs to shut the community up, or to bribe them to agree that this heir is the rightful one.

When they arrive the monastery is in consternation about the murders. Brother Taris welcomes the party and proclaims to everyone that the problem will soon be sorted out. They are given rooms and told they can question anyone and eat in the refectory. The next time for an Oracle should not be soon. Shortly after they arrive, Lord Suth arrives and there should be a confrontation. Lord Suth does not want anyone else involved in the investigation. He does not seriously suspect the PCs of involvement, but tries his best to get rid of them and gain all the credit for himself.

Whatever happens, everyone should eat at the refectory that night, where Lord Suth tries to provoke the party into attacking his guards. He does this with witty remarks which get more and more insulting until they are impossible to ignore. He tries to insult whatever seems most precious to the PCs. "Win that sword in a bran-tub did you?" "So, you come from Dorindia? I've heard that city's famous for its prostitutes. Have they had so many children they have to send groups of them out adventuring now?" Suth does not fight himself unless forced to, saying that he is an old man, but he can fight if necessary. His guards are well armed and fight, leaping on to benches and trying to injure or disable the PCs in an attempt to encourage them to leave. Brother Taris eventually stops the fight before serious damage is done by paralysing everyone as they stand and not releasing them until apologies have been made.

In the night, Suthis should creep into the bed of whichever PC best fits her profile. This is a ploy arranged by her father who wishes to create a scandal; if the PC does not get rid of her quickly the guards burst in and Suthis cries rape. Not surprisingly, this does not go down well with the celibate community.

After that the party should spend some time investigating. There are many members of the community to talk to. Suth is doing the same thing, but unless the party members have made themselves very unpopular people are more willing to talk to them than to him. Eventually Jameril or Litnik tells them the Oracle's answer:

"The bloody hand of battle brings death across the land, you bleed and fall and rot because you will not understand there is no king, there is no right. Justice is lying dead, there is no heir, dark crows shall eat your juicy eyes instead."

They should be able to understand that this means there will be a civil war. Whether they or Suth gets this information first depends on how friendly and subtle they have been, and how well they have conducted their investigations.

At about this point there should be a chance to question the Oracle, who is again Jameril. Brother Taris does everything he can to prevent this questioning, most especially trying to discredit everyone and then suggesting better questions that could be asked concerning the civil war and the heir. If possible have an uneasy truce between Suth and the party at this point, so that they can all question the Oracle together. They should be asking who killed the visitors, but they may use one of Taris' questions instead. When Jameril speaks the room begins to glow. If they've asked about the murders she says:

"Held fixed in place, a disgrace, murdered for gain with no chase."

This might confirm some suspicions connecting the murders with Taris. On the other hand, Taris seems to be on their side against Lord Suth, which should confuse them. In fact, Taris thinks that Suth has more chance of learning the truth than the party, and would be more dangerous if he did. If Taris thinks anyone knows too much, he attempts to murder them, by paralysing the unfortunate victim and then cutting their throat. He arranges to meet them in the refectory when it is deserted after the midnight service, and does it then. Brother Taris did in fact murder the visitors, intending to work himself into a good position to manipulate the coming civil war which nobody else knows about.

If a greater sense of urgency is required, news could be brought to the monastery, by courier, that the king has died and the land is indeed poised on the brink of civil war. This could be cut short by either Suth or the PCs falsely claiming that Lord Oron has proclaimed one of the candidates. Or they could both do this but pick different candidates, thus ensuring the outbreak of civil war.

For Further Ideas

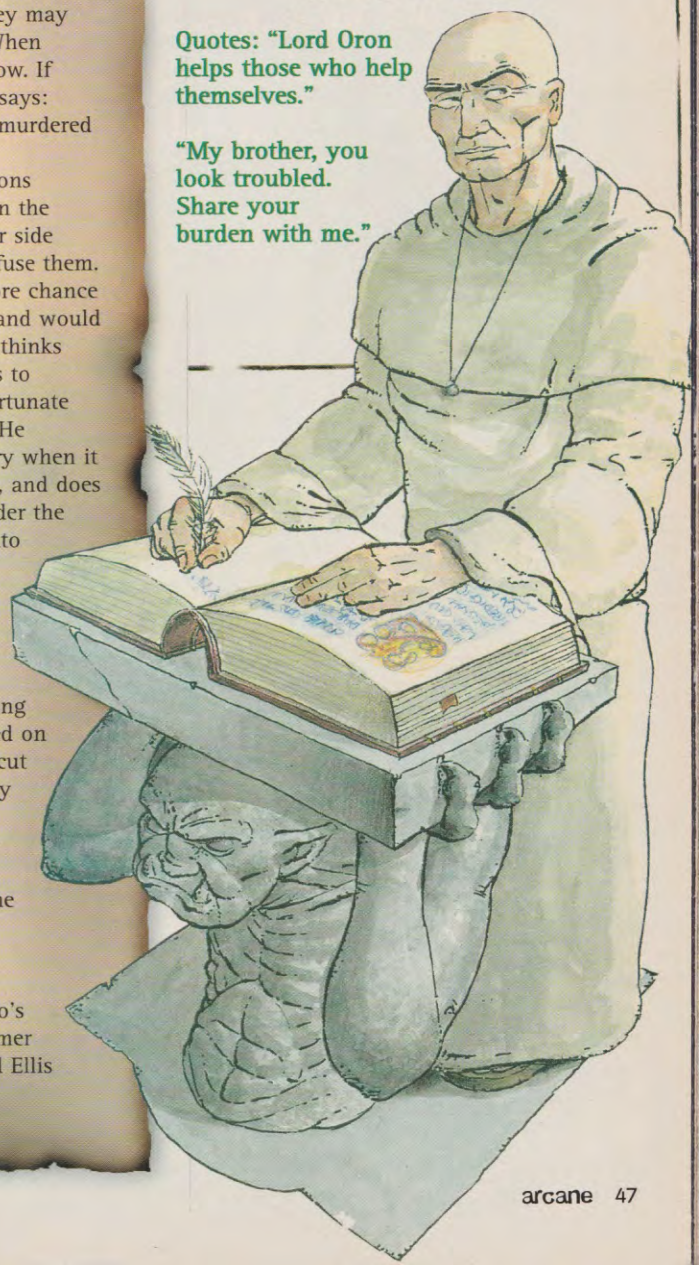
For more inspiration see Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (and film), Rumer Godden's *In This House of Brede* and Ellis Peters' *Brother Cadfael* books.

Brother Taris

Brother Taris is the Abbot of Orontal. He is 45, good-looking (in a tall, dark and handsome way) and has imposing eyebrows. Specialising in interpreting Oracles, he wears a white habit at all times with a single pearl on a chain around his neck, exactly like all the other monks. A powerful force in the community, everyone pays attention to his opinions. He is also influential outside the monastery and sometimes travels to court where his opinions are heard with interest. He is aware of what is going on in the world and, although he never breaks the vows of his community, is not a particularly devout man. Taris knows what answer the Oracle gave the strangers, but is reluctant to give it to anyone else, hoping to use the information for himself. He is good at discovering information from visitors and has some magical ability, which may come from Lord Oron – for example, he can hold people frozen in place. They should have a chance of resisting, especially the second or subsequent times it is cast on them.

Quotes: "Lord Oron helps those who help themselves."

"My brother, you look troubled. Share your burden with me."



What are you like?

arcane READERS' POLL RESULTS

Now, we're not statisticians, mercifully, but that didn't stop us from reading all sorts of strange inferences into the results of the arcane readers' poll we ran at the back end of last year...

The results showed that 20% of respondents were subscribers. Less than 10% of our total readership subscribe, so we assume that most of the people who replied represent the hard-core of our readership, which is to be expected. Of these, 72% said they first bought **arcane** because it was a roleplaying magazine. We hope they continue to buy it for better reasons than that. Of those of you who replied, 13% said you bought your first copy for the cover, while only 9% said you started buying **arcane** on recommendation. Early days. Despite this, though, an average of 2.1 people read each copy of **arcane** – 54% of you said that two or three other people read your copy, so you obviously don't mind recommending it that far.

Tech heads

Even more impressive to us was the statistic that 51% of the respondents spend more time as a referee than a player. Although we have run a lot of referee-orientated features, we know this figure can't mean that half of our readers are referees. Maybe the result arises because such people are more likely to respond to surveys – it gives them a chance to write. Either that, or you're all so experienced and dedicated that your group can switch seamlessly between referees to suit any situation.

A remarkable 69% of the respondents own a PC. Compare this to the 6% of you who own a Mac. Meanwhile, technology moves on, and a healthy 8% of you now have a PlayStation, while 66% have access to the Internet. What a wired-in bunch you are.

Your favourite arcane

Your all-time favourite issue of **arcane** is issue 6 (19% said their cats preferred it). This was Steve Faragher's last issue as editor, in which he took the opportunity to venture into the political arena, reporting on certain factions of the Christian right's burning hatred for our hobby. We also reviewed *Netrunner*, Richard Garfield's follow-up to *Magic: The Gathering*. Issue 10 (14%) was the second favourite, presumably for the *Traveller* coverage, while issue 8, which contained a review of *Alliances*, came in third (12%). Issue 7 (11%), Paul Pettengale's first as editor, came in fourth, and issue 9 (9%) which, along with issue 1 has now completely sold out, was the fifth most popular and also the second least popular. The least popular was issue 3 (16%), upon which we wrote some fairly obscure cover lines, for a laugh. The joke obviously fell flat though, but you get that on the big jobs. And, by the way, the other magazines you read most are *Dragon*, *Valkyrie* and *White Dwarf*. No surprises there.

Games people play

- 96% of the respondents play roleplaying games, which is hardly surprising. Presumably the other 4% forgot why they read **arcane.**
- 62% play boardgames.
- 27% play by mail.
- 6% play by e-mail.
- 63% of the respondents play collectable card games, which is reason enough for us to cover such games.
- 54% play miniature systems, which makes us wonder if we should have dropped the Hot Metal section we ran until issue 7.
- 20% play live-action. This figure seems to have increased dramatically.

NB. Issues 1-10 of ***arcane*** *were surveyed.*

How do you rate coverage of these features in arcane?

	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Game reviews	49	45	5	1
RPGs	41	46	11	2
Features	39	48	9	4
Despatches	38	43	16	4
Encounters	31	33	24	12
The covers	25	46	23	6
arcane scribblings	18	49	25	9
CCGs	19	42	30	9
Great Library	15	31	39	15
Play-by-mail	4	20	38	40
Boardgames	3	21	44	32
LARP coverage	2	9	33	56
Play by e-mail	2	9	31	58

What are arcane's most important features?

	Very important	Reasonably important	Not important
RPG coverage	89	11	-
Game reviews	77	22	1
Features	75	24	1
Despatches	59	38	3
Encounters	38	48	14
arcane scribblings	32	56	11
Collectable card coverage	30	33	37
Great Library	23	52	5
Boardgames coverage	14	55	36
The covers	13	60	26
Play-by-mail coverage	6	43	51
LARP coverage	5	31	64
Play by e-mail coverage	3	27	70

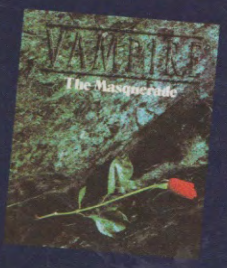
Your favourite genres

Fantasy	(85%)
Science fiction	(64%)
Horror	(12%)
Superhero	(12%)
Historical	(12%)
Military/Mercenary	(12%)
Espionage	(9%)

28% of you said you would attend a roleplaying convention this year, with a further 56% saying possibly. Pathetic. Don't procrastinate. Turn to our conventions diary (see News) and plan the year ahead.

Girls play games too

The male ego comes in for a bit of a bashing as Tamsyn Hutchinson talks to female roleplayers and finds out that girls just wanna have fun too.



Stumbling upon a group that includes female roleplayers is rarer than finding roleplaying depicted in the media. But female roleplayers do exist, and lately have been fighting for a better view. The gaming societies at both Glasgow and Strathclyde university have female presidents, and the committees for the live-action clubs are full of women. In the industry, most new systems have had female input at the highest level and even female roleplaying journalists are getting a break. So why is it that when a long-standing group of guys hear that a woman will be joining their group, they are sometimes put out?

Most of the time it's because they think it will herald the raising of language tone, the removal of all gory plotlines (is this such a bad thing?) and the inevitable loss of play due to hormones. To some of them it's a secret boy's thing, and girls just wouldn't be able to understand the concepts of battling demons or saving humanity. We're far too busy washing our hair. We may be different on the outside, but when it comes down to our favourite hobby, are we all that opposite? And what do the fairer sex really think about their male counterparts? I organised a game to find out...

Charlie's Angels: The Remake. But this time it's all a game.

The Importance of Chocolate

It was a cold and stormy night. High upon the hill entered the three witches. One bearing religious wine, one with food and the third holding the sacred spotted cubes. Well, it was dark, and we did all have long hair. Although two of our number were missing (boys note: girls think hot dates are more important than roleplaying) we battled on. The Strathclyde students' union was cunningly chosen for our venue due to its abundance of chocolate vending machines (chocolate being female beer) and absence of boyfriends. No excuses such as 'I have to make some tea/watch the football' would be needed here by the inquisitive male partner. Just a quiet game of *Vampire: The Masquerade* with Chris, Lyndsay and I, and a chat about our opinions on the whole male/female roleplaying thing. Or so I thought...

After all the gossip and provision seeking was out of the way, we got down

VISUAL EQUALITY

As well as being some of the first games to be truly unbiased towards gender, White Wolf's *Storyteller* series also features many images of powerful female characters, rather than the stereotypical 'chainmail bikini babes' – a trend continued in Wizards of the Coast's *Vampire: The Eternal Struggle* card game.

to generating characters. In this game it's a simple system which involves allocating set points rather than trying to persuade the ref that you really did roll a 20, honest. The tone for the evening was set with Chris' joke about vampire abilities: "If we have Animal Ken, couldn't we have Jungle Barbie too?" she asked. Spot the first major difference between male and female roleplayers? Then, when we came to the discipline section (vampiric powers, usually limited to your vampire Clan), Lyndsay, after hearing about Celerity (a power that enables the character to move quickly in times of stress), wondered if celeriac was a fast vegetable. Oh dear. Maybe it was the effect of having too much oestrogen in one place. Time to interject some sanity. So, why do we roleplay?

Chris: "Because it's fun! Less escapism than exploring alternative existences and different surroundings."
Lyndsay: "First of all a friend invited me along to a game, and then I found I could expand my interest in SF and fantasy. In roleplaying I can do what I want."
Tamsyn: "I like being someone else for a while. I also get to have an affair without cheating on my boyfriend [she grins]. No really, I get to be who I want to be."

Gender bending

Finally they finished filling in their character sheets, and Lyndsay presented me with a vampire of the Brujah Clan called Buffy (yes, she does have blonde hair and an obsession with lip gloss) and Chris produced a Toreador Clan vampire called Nat. I started them off in Glasgow (it's much easier than trying to imagine a street plan of San Francisco), and they had to think about where and who their next blood meal was coming from. Because both had opted for female characters I asked them how they felt about the gender of the people they played.

Chris: "It's a challenge playing males. Obviously it's easier playing females. I never seem to end up playing the macho brain-dead testosterone types, though."
Tamsyn: "I agree. Occasionally I try to play a guy, but they always end up being hated by all the other male characters! My guys are far too cerebral."
Lyndsay: "It's easier to identify with females, and you can get to be the woman you always wanted to be, like attractive, flirty and tough."

So it seems that girls like playing girls. Playing a twisted version of yourself can be fun, and good roleplaying means getting into the mind of your character, knowing what they would do in a given situation and how they would react to certain events. But the mind of the other gender is a mystery – it's why we are so bad at relationships – so it should be harder to play a realistic person of the opposite sex. How do you feel about the guys playing girls?

Tamsyn: "As a referee, whenever a guy takes a female character I give him a rough time, just so he knows how it feels, and make him think about how a girl might react. In my experience the characters always try to sleep with any male NPC that walks by, or make jokes about chastity."

> "Girls care more about character interaction than how large their weapon is."

Chris: "I don't mind it because my boyfriend plays girls quite a lot. I know some refs don't like it to the point where they don't allow it to go on in their games. I don't understand that."
Tamsyn: "Yeah, you can't limit your players that much just because *you* can't handle it, and so don't think they can."

Nuns with guns?

It seems that there isn't much crossover between the sexes, they generally stick to what they are. There seems to be a set of stereotypical gender skills in the minds of players. Male characters are usually the strong, combat-orientated ones, and the women play the more skilled roles, where intelligence outweighs the capability to render someone unconscious. Women often try to use their feminine charms in character a lot more, and don't rush into things when there is a peaceful solution. There are odd occasions when you find the gorgeous-looking bodyguard babe, or the intelligent art-thief hunk, but it's not very common. So, what are the differences between playing with girls and with guys?

Lyndsay: "I think guys take things a lot more seriously."
Tamsyn: "Yeah, they like buying all the sourcebooks, and putting the maps up on their walls so they know how many streets it is from the inn to the armoury."
Lyndsay: "They get personally involved."
Chris: "I generally find that guys are more obsessed with statistics, and more into game mechanics. They have to know where and who they are. Girls just want to have fun. Men seem to be able to exist on combat situations alone. I find that dull."
Tamsyn: "I think girls care more about character interaction than how large their weapon is. Just like in real life..."
(Much laughter ensues at the expense of the fragile male ego.)

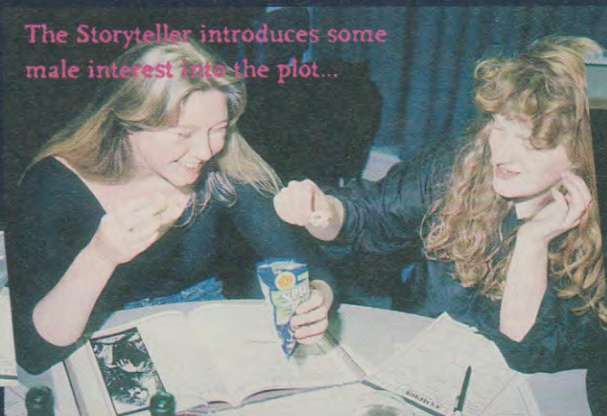
Window shopping at 1am

Nat and Buffy decided to set out from their cheap bedsit and brother's house to the local nightclub to find a bite to eat. Being beside the river there were lots of chances for dark corners and, in Buffy's case, body dumping. While munching, both characters experienced strange feeding urges, and went into a frenzy (that's when the animal nature of the vampire takes over the body).

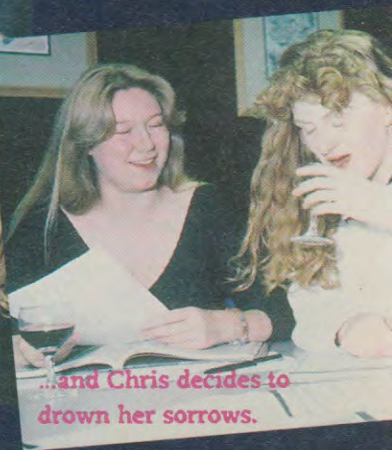
But before their victims died, they called out their names. This seemed to throw the players. Some supernatural force was guiding them towards something, and it wasn't the Tremere for a change. How did they handle it? Well, Buffy disposed of the evidence and went into the town for some late night window shopping. Nat tried to avoid all the police cars surrounding the above-mentioned disposal (even the World of Darkness has police and people walking their dogs late at night) and headed off for more familiar surroundings.

During a lull in the action I bring up the idea that roleplaying is traditionally a male hobby. I hate playing a game in which you can time your drinks to the combat encounters. These games seem like a male rite of passage. To prove yourself you must kill three dragons and maim five goblins before breakfast, then make all the local wenches fall in love with you. Women are a lot more accepting, they usually don't have anything to prove. There is no competition to the dominant woman. Do you think roleplaying has an overall male theme?

Tamsyn (holding the rulebook), Chris (pinching her crisps) and Lyndsay sit down for a game of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and take the opportunity to talk about how the roleplaying hobby approaches women.



The Storyteller introduces some male interest into the plot...



...and Chris decides to drown her sorrows.

Chris: "Well, it's certainly male dominated, but that's cultural."
Lyndsay: "No, it's just that more guys play it. It seems like a giant boys' club. Women can get scared off."
Tamsyn: "Yes. Most games are aimed at them, and written with them in mind. How often do you see something entitled 'Effeminate Blokes with Curlers'? Although 'Macho Women with Guns' is fine."
Chris: "It's a swords-and-ugly-trolls thing."
Tamsyn: "The concept of roleplaying comes from the days when men would go out to earn some money and something interesting might happen along the way, which they would brag about when they got back. We were still at home making dinner. And even when games do have women in pictures, they usually have their clothes missing."
Chris: "It doesn't surprise me that women roleplay, given that the whole acting thing is associated with so-called 'female' traits."
Tamsyn: "Don't let Arnie hear you say that."
Lyndsay: "But he can't act."

Impending doom

The brave characters continue on, even though if they were real they would have probably thought it was all a bit strange and gone home for some nice, comforting late-night television. Being obsessed with pretending to be human, Nat opted for a cup of tea that she couldn't drink in an all-night café. She used her charisma to be invited back to a guy's flat (he was a student, they're pushovers) to watch *Pulp Fiction*. While walking the town Buffy was warned of impending doom by drunks living in shop doorways. Before she could pick out some new boots, she was chased along the main street by a man in a trenchcoat with red eyes and no face. And the busker didn't even notice. Sounds like a normal day to me. Apart from being chased by things not of this Earth, what annoys you about roleplaying?

Chris: "Male chauvinist roleplayers."
Tamsyn: "Like when they say 'Don't dirty yer dress luv, I'll smeg that ork fer ya'."
Lyndsay: "When guys try to get heavy with your character because she's female."
Chris: "All people who think roleplaying is sad, or a male thing, or that it means you are socially inadequate."
Tamsyn: "Rules lawyers and people who always take the same type of character."

As Buffy puts on her extra-fast running shoes, Nat sits comfortably watching her Tarantino. Or she does until another trenchcoat-wearing, no-face, red-eyed monster breaks into this poor guy's flat. To be honest he does act valiantly, jumping over the sofa and trying to save Nat from another death, but to no avail. A couple of chops later and he's down, out for the count, and probably ethereally thanking himself for being out of the whole mess. Nat is faced with a creature hell-bent on her destruction, and the body of her host is blocking her way to the door. What does she do? Luckily, Nat is proficient at Dodging and manages to escape from the top-floor flat and out into the night. At least she's undead to avoid another sunrise.

So both characters are confused and running scared. Well, for this Storyteller it's been a productive evening. Just wait until they find out what's really going on.

Women in roleplaying are opinionated, and not afraid of telling their male equivalents what they think. They hate being treated, and their characters being treated, like bimbos, and just want to get on with playing the game. They prefer playing women, but with brain cells rather than big toys. But ultimately they hate being pigeon-holed as socially inadequate human beings, and other players who are obsessive about their hobby and insist on dissecting a game to the point where it loses all the fun. Just like you. So, next time a woman joins your group treat her like you would a guy, and you never know, she might just be a better gamer than all of you.

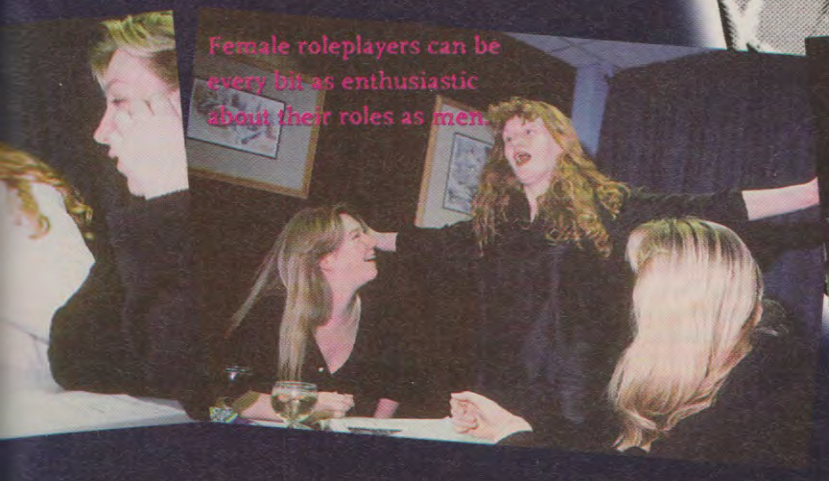
Tamsyn: "When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or perhaps rain?"
Lyndsay: "When the hurly-burly's done, or when the battle's lost and won?"
Chris: "Next week at my flat, 7pm."
Tamsyn and Lyndsay: "Okay. Now let's watch *ER*."

vital statistics

Tamsyn, 20, final-year Immunology/Microbiology student, and lover of Bailey's Häagen-Dazs.
Chris, 23, wannabe neuroscientist and part-time painter when she finds time.
Lyndsay, 17, fresher and chocolate aficionado.

Vampire: The Masquerade is one of the *Storyteller* games from White Wolf. It is set in the World of Darkness, a political minefield where everyone is out to stab you in the back. Vampires, mages, werewolves, ghosts (Wraiths) and Fairies (Changelings) are real, and the only way to get ahead is to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer. The Brujah, Tremere and the Toreador are three of the seven large vampire groups, or Clans. The Brujah are the Anarchs, who are easily encouraged to fight, and like leather. Toreadors are the artists who strive to be mortal, and are the social movers and shakers. And the Tremere are the power-driven Clan who have magical powers.

Vampire: The [illegible] was [illegible] of the first [illegible] to be truly [illegible] unbiased. [illegible] examples are [illegible] full of women as [illegible] as many of the [illegible] NPCs are [illegible], and there are many 'she's' in the text as 'he's'.



Female roleplayers can be every bit as enthusiastic about their roles as men.

It's the age-old battle yet again: red-heads vs blondes.

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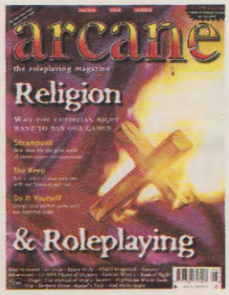
Issue 5 had Richard Garfield's ideas on *Netrunner*, reviewed *Vampire: The Dark Ages* and the Train pulled into our Encounter.



Issue 6 explained why the Christian right wants to ban RPGs, reviewed *Netrunner* and gave you a Keep in the Encounter pull-out.

Issue 13 is lucky for anyone interested in becoming a referee, trying their hand at LARP or playing *Deadlands* or *Mirage*.

Issue 14 had the readers' 50 top RPGs, a deep-space probe in Encounters, a selection of *Mirage* combos and reviewed *Settlers*.

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Who wants to

Have you noticed how slowly some people age? Is something sinister afoot or is it just healthy living? Steve Hatherley investigates immortality in RPGs.

Immortals in roleplaying games usually follow the pattern set by the film *Highlander* – grotesquely powerful individuals with unnatural abilities and a thirst for adventure. This may be fine for some campaigns, but these over-the-top characters are unbalancing for many. However, immortality still presents opportunities for interesting encounters and adventures no matter what the scale of your game. 'Ordinary' immortals are people who simply don't grow old. They don't necessarily have strange powers or magical talents, but they have problems of their own. The word 'immortal' in this context is slightly misleading. These characters are not truly immortal – they can still die. However, barring sickness, accidents and violence, they will live forever.

Types of Immortals

Immortals come in two different types – those who are born immortal, and those who started life mortal and later became immortal. The two are quite different.

Natural immortals: These characters are like anyone else, except at some point they stop aging. It might take them years to realise – friends and family probably notice first, and once the questions start, what do you do?

If immortality is genetic, it might have other signs – immortals may be prone to skin conditions, odd-coloured eyes or golden hair. Distinctive physical characteristics make immortals easier to spot. This is both good and bad. It helps immortals find others like themselves, but it also helps those who want to persecute them.

Artificial immortals: Artificially-created immortals start as ordinary mortals until an extraordinary event or accident changes their lives. If immortals are created accidentally – a transporter malfunction, alien energies from a mysterious meteorite or perhaps a malfunctioning spell – then there may never be any more. Deliberately immortal characters might be embraced by a vampire or have drunk from the Well of Eternal Life. If there is a way to create immortals, then this may be a personal goal for one of the characters, or their enemies.

If you are running a 'realistic' game, or if you plan to add immortals to an existing campaign, then immortals need to be rare. Legends of devil people or folk that just don't die may exist, but immortals shouldn't be commonplace. On the other hand, many campaigns are quite capable of hosting large numbers of immortals, and in some immortals may even be the norm – aging might be considered unusual. The number of immortals in the game affects their attitude, and society's attitude. This feature assumes that immortals are natural and rare (a random quirk of genetics), because these characters are easiest to add to a campaign and are usually the most fun.

The big secret

People fear what they do not understand. Immortals in mortal society must conceal their true nature, otherwise things may be difficult. An immortal's life is therefore dedicated to hiding his true nature. And keeping the big secret is difficult and lonely – maintaining your distance is the best way to prevent mortals from finding out. So immortals keep moving, never staying in one place for more than about ten years. Their lives are filled with abandoned friends, colleagues and lovers.

Occasionally there are problems. It's a small world and every now and again they bump into old friends and family years after they have 'disappeared'. Luckily, claiming ignorance and mistaken identity usually works because the alternative is just too fantastic. This is a modern problem because until recently people did not generally travel far – leaving an area used to be enough to secure an immortal's anonymity.

Paintings can be a bigger problem. Mike Resnik's space opera, *The Dark Lady*, follows one alien's search for an enigmatic woman

Illustration ©arcane by Alexis Liosatos

live forever?

who appears in a dozen portraits painted centuries apart. And while portraits may be a problem for any immortal, ageless artists may have problems if experts recognise their style. Photographs are far worse. Next time you meet someone who is truly camera-shy, you might wonder if it's because they've got something to hide.

Peculiar skills, odd accents, knowledge of places and events long distant also raise suspicion. If you drop an immortal on unsuspecting players this is a great way of suggesting that something is amiss with their new companion. Occasionally an immortal's secret is revealed by accident, through recorded words or deeds. For example, the story of how the Burning Viking Inn earned its name is rather strange. Two hundred years ago the inn caught fire. Almost everybody escaped, except for two children playing in the stables. Rescuers tried in vain to get them to safety. Then one man, a Viking giant, kicked open the stable door and ran to save the children. As he entered, the roof started collapsing. Ignoring the flames, the giant reached up and supported the roof long enough for the children to escape. Players may not immediately link their large Scandinavian companion with the story, but he bears a striking resemblance to the giant on the inn's old sign, and he does have those terrible scars on his hands and arms…

Keeping the secret

Some immortals have techniques for hiding away from prying eyes…

High society: The privileged rich don't play by the same rules as everyone else. If you're rich you can surround yourself with walls and security systems, and hide from the rest of society. A billionaire recluse? Could be an immortal.

The homeless: The best place to hide is often in the open. Every society involves people who are just outside it – vagrants, beggars, bums. The poor and the homeless are ignored by everyone else, and as a result immortals find it a useful place to hide. With secret signs, codes and rituals, vagrant immortals live in a complex world of their own.

Isolated communities: Villages tucked away in remote passes somewhere in eastern Europe or perhaps ancient Tibetan monasteries – these are places where immortals gather away from prying eyes. These communities are often described as 'backward' or 'timeless', which only serves to attract new immortals.

The men who never shine: Mediocrity is wonderful camouflage. History remembers those who excel, so although immortals may be unsurpassed archers or fencers (skills honed when archery and fencing meant something), they are unlikely to be found competing in the Olympics. Too much limelight.

Who else knows?

Perhaps the big secret is not so secret after all. What happens when other people find out that immortals exist? This becomes increasingly important in contemporary or near-future settings because modern bureaucracies, with vast records and mountains of data, are difficult to fool. Creating a new identity is more complicated when birth certificates, bank accounts, social security numbers, pensions and more are all required for an ordinary life. In Clifford D Simak's *Way Station,* Enoch Wallace (a man who hasn't aged in 100 years) is caught out by a very old magazine subscription.

What happens when the government finds out that immortals exist? Do they experiment on immortals to find out what makes them different, or are they more benign? Perhaps the government makes things easier for immortals. "New identity, madam? Certainly, just fill out this form and send it to the address overleaf with a cheque for £400. Thank you." But if so, why do it? See 'Fingerprints' on page 57 for one possible reason.

Lovers, friends and family

So, your partner has just told you that she is immortal. How do you react? Disbelief and ridicule, and she drops the subject. But then you notice that she isn't getting any older. Meanwhile you're getting older and greyer. It isn't fair. Then she raises the subject again, and this time you know she's telling the truth. Worse, she tells you she's got to leave before other people begin to suspect.

Some societies might have legends and fairy tales about people who don't age. Those fairy tales might portray such immortals as evil, or noble and wise. Those same legends might mention distinguishing features

such as odd-coloured eyes or a birthmark of some sort. What happens when a child is born with those features? It may be common knowledge that immortals exist. If so, perhaps they are treasured and respected rather than loathed and hated. Immortals may graduate to powerful positions in such a society – aldermen, judges and the like.

Adding Immortals

Immortals fit easily into sci-fi or fantasy games, but the less detailed the background the more unsatisfactory the character. For example, a hero in *Everway* can be Ageless (perhaps hundreds of years old), but because the *Everway* background is loose and undefined, it doesn't really mean anything. Compare that with being able to say, "I remember Guy Fawkes. Bad breath, but what a visionary!"

GURPS includes the Unaging advantage, and benefits from dozens of historical worldbooks to plunder. Unaging (and Ageless) is cheap to 'buy' because Ageless is unimportant to play – it has no value in combat and doesn't affect reaction rolls. Some fictional backgrounds are detailed enough to make immortals worthwhile – *Traveller, RuneQuest, Middle-earth* and a few others. Other than that, immortals are best suited to games set in contemporary or historical periods. Two sample characters are described below. Although described in historical terms, either would fit into a fantasy game.

Kuan Yu the Warrior Monk: Kuan Yu is a Taoist monk-warrior, a philosopher of battle. He seeks excellence, and the Way, through combat. Born in 300AD he has a strong sense of right and wrong, and a sense of duty to the oppressed. Kuan Yu stays on the move, studying the various forms of martial arts as he strives for perfection. It took him some time to realise he was different from other folks, and he initially believed that he had achieved immortality through breath control, diet and exercises (because all Taoists study the way of eternal life). He has since discovered otherwise.

Lucy the Thief: Lucy was born in Hannibal's time, in 200BC, and while she lived in Rome she became an accomplished trickster, thief and gambler. She quickly acquired a small fortune and discovered a knack for making money. Lucy was set for life until the authorities uncovered her ageless nature and she fled to avoid capture and arrest.

19th century

A number of games are set in the 19th century, either Gothic horror such as *Cthulhu by Gaslight* or the American old west – *Deadlands, Boot Hill* and similar. During this period immortals are easier to catch because permanent records become prevalent and people travel further.

Kuan Yu: In his search for excellence Kuan Yu has come to the old west. His strong sense of honour soon leads him towards trouble, and he seems to have a talent for getting mixed up in squabbles. He may also be encountered by the characters as a bounty hunter, turning his victims in to the authorities.

Lucy: After several grim centuries and a few mistakes, Lucy enjoys Victorian England. She is a wealthy merchant and, having learnt how mortals distrust immortals, a recluse. However, she occasionally craves excitement and then leaves her secure mansion to mix anonymously in high and low society.

Modern day

Immortals are well suited to the modern day, especially weird and investigative games. Immortals should feel at home in the settings of *Don't Look Back, Conspiracy X, Witchcraft, GURPS Voodoo* and the *World of Darkness* among others. However, the modern day has many pitfalls to trap the unwary.

Kuan Yu: Perfection is difficult to achieve. Worse, the authorities have started closing in – they know that something is strange about the enigmatic Chinese martial artist. So Kuan Yu has retreated underground, a fugitive working outside the law against the forces of oppression. (Think *The A-Team* or Repairman Jack from F Paul Wilson's *The Tomb.)*

Lucy: Rich and influential, Lucy is the Chief Executive Officer of a huge international company. It is carefully run, with only a few selected board members knowing her true nature. Lucy's weakness is, however, bureaucracy and records – government characters may spot inconsistencies with the reclusive CEO and her dislike of publicity.

The Future

Technology may bring immortality to everyone – such as *Traveller's* expensive anagathics treatment. Joe Haldeman's *The Long Habit of Living* describes a newly-developed immortality process and those who try to control it. Many backgrounds have powerful alien races who may be opposed to the creation of immortality treatments. As Ambassador Kosh says in the 'Deathwalker' episode of *Babylon 5,* "You are not ready for immortality."

Far-future games, unless they come with a detailed history, do not incorporate immortals well. This problem does not affect near-future games (such as *Cyberpunk 2020, GURPS Terradyne* or *Shadowrun)* because they have all of history to draw from.

Kuan Yu: In the dangerous world of the near-future, Kuan Yu takes to the new technology like a fish to water. He becomes heavily chipped, an ageless street samurai and the scourge of villains in the underworld.

Lucy: With mercantile skills honed over centuries, Lucy is now so rich that nothing can touch her. Recently Lucy has encountered other immortals and wants to meet more because she knows that there is safety in numbers. Lucy might hire the characters to find someone she thinks may be immortal.

The Immortal Campaign

The ultimate way to use immortals in a game is to create an immortal campaign, an epic jaunt through history. If you're playing *GURPS,* such a campaign is one of the few ways (outside of *GURPS Time Travel)* to use most of the worldbooks in a single game.

An immortal campaign is best played in parts – an episode in Rome, followed by an adventure in China or with the Vikings, and so on all the way to the modern day and beyond. The true heroes can be introduced gradually, and the players might not know that their characters are immortal until they turn up hundreds of years later in another episode. Poul Anderson's *The Boat of a Million Years* takes this approach to follow a group of immortals through history. Take a look at 'The Renderer', on the right, for a more structured approach.

Of course, the real reason for adding immortals into a game is that they are fun. Immortals are also a little bit strange. They don't behave in the same way as normal folks – not that the players are likely to come across many of those.

Adventure seeds

Fingerprints: It's a missing persons case, much like any other. The characters work for an investigative agency – the FBI, MI-5, the police or whoever. A routine investigation uncovers a set of fingerprints – nothing unusual. The characters are told that there is a match, and the report will be on their desk later. But the report never turns up.

When they look into the missing fingerprint report, the characters discover that there was a mistake – the matching records were 40 years old, and the guy they matched was 65 then. He must be dead by now, but why keep 40 year-old fingerprints on record?

The characters' boss has the missing fingerprints file. He is a member of a secret cabal of immortals, powerful men who have become immortal by drinking the blood of natural immortals. Using their resources they can locate other immortals. Keeping old fingerprints on file is just one method. Then, in exchange for a regular donation of blood, the cabal offers the immortals new identities whenever they require them. Most immortals are pleased – the price is small and government-aided identities are more robust than anything they can create. However, a few immortals do not agree to the cabal's demands. The missing person the characters have been instructed to find is one such immortal. When the characters eventually track the immortal down, he tries to bargain with them. In return for his freedom he will explain why their superiors want him.

The Renderer: an immortal campaign

When time was young and mankind foolish, the Renderer came to our planet and liked what it saw. Fresh, malleable minds, succulent flesh. But unfortunately base ignorance and an unpleasantly fertile environment prevailed. So the Renderer pinched off gobbets of flesh from its greasy hide and created 12 avatars, shapechanging immortal entities charged with the task of introducing science, and reducing the planet to a polluted, radioactive heaven. Then the Renderer left. The avatars went to work, but not without problems. Atlantis sunk without trace, the Roman Empire fell, and it wasn't until the Industrial Revolution that things really started picking up.

The avatars might have had more success if it wasn't for the Lynx, an agent of the Renderer's enemies. The Lynx is alone on the planet, and works with the local mortals to thwart the avatars' evil plans. The Lynx has had only intermittent success because avatars are slippery and difficult to kill.

Infrequently, natural immortals are born. The Lynx can recognise immortals and, once certain that they are not avatars, it recruits them into its eternal struggle. However, as the 20th century draws to a close it seems as if the avatars are winning. The ozone is depleted, the atmosphere grows polluted. It can only be a matter of time before the Renderer returns.

This is an episodic campaign – the Lynx enlists the help of locals (some of them immortal) to foil the evil avatars, destroying them if possible. The players will only know if their characters are immortal when they turn up in another episode, hundreds of years later.

All my children

The characters are approached by a heavily pregnant woman who tells them that her father is dying and requires the assistance of some competent people. She leads them to her house and into a bedroom where a man (who doesn't look old enough to be her father) lies dying. He tells them that he has been beaten, tortured and poisoned by his enemies. They have released him hoping to follow him to his allies. He knows that they are watching the house, and that they are now watching the characters. He is sorry, and wishes that there was some other way but, well, he isn't in any condition to do anything about it.

He requires that the characters find four people – his allies. He gives them descriptions and what he knows of their whereabouts. The characters must show these four allies a ring (which the man slips from his finger) and tell each that 'The Council knows'. They will know what to do. If the characters require a reward, he writes it out on a scrap of parchment. If the players get three allies to sign and seal the parchment, then the fourth will reward them.

What the old man doesn't tell the characters is that he is an immortal – as are his allies, his sons and daughters (the pregnant woman is also immortal, although the child she carries is not). The Council is a secret body of people who want to know what makes immortals tick. They want more immortals to play with and study, and are watching the player characters just as the old man said. They will not interfere, except to bribe or corrupt the characters.

So you want to be an immortal? (advice to players)

Playing an immortal isn't about running around with a big sword chopping heads off. Neither is it a short-cut to playing that 50th level magic user you've dreamed of. Sure, you can do both if your ref lets you, but simple power should not be the reason you want to be ageless. It's unusual and fun for a number of reasons:

- You have been around for a long time and have a few strange skills and some peculiar knowledge. Work with your referee to guide you in a way that's appropriate to the game.
- None of the other players will know you're different. At least, not at first. But it's no fun if they never find out, so plan your revelation scene with care, and make sure you drop a few clues to start them thinking.
- If you're playing *GURPS* or another points-based system with advantages and disadvantages, you should take healthy options (Immunity to Disease, Rapid Healing) and avoid the medical disadvantages such as Haemophilia. If you want to see much of history, you will need to stay healthy.
- Because you're unusual, the referee might favour you with a few important plot details.
- However, the main issue that needs tackling is motivation. You're an immortal, you could live for centuries. Why are you hanging out with ruffians and scoundrels? They will be putting your life at risk. They must have something that you want pretty bad. So, what is it?

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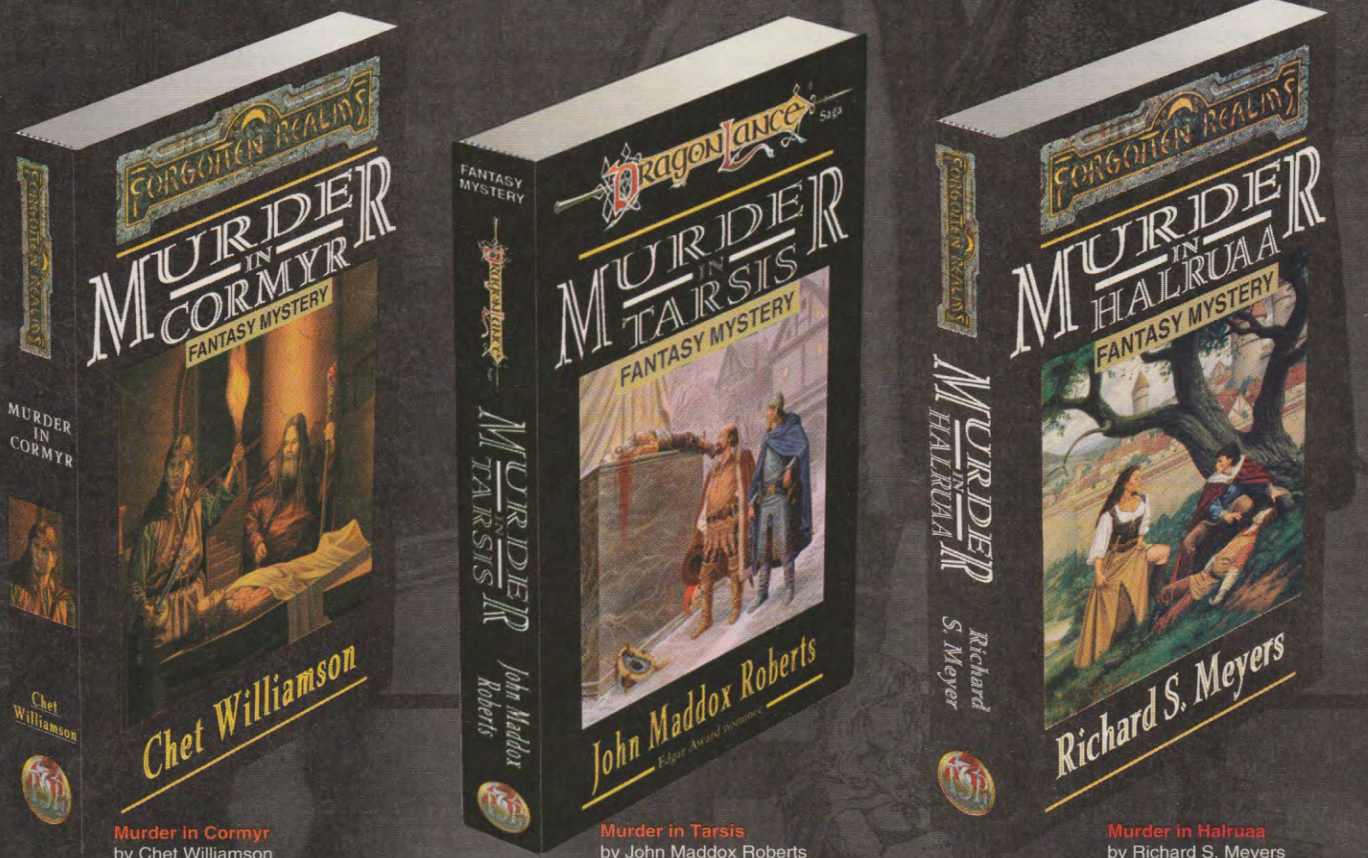

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The Icons

Each review in arcane is identified with a rather nifty icon showing what kind of game it is. Here's what they mean:

BOOKS AND SUPPLEMENTS

COMPUTER GAMES AND UTILITIES

DICE GAMES AND EXPANSIONS

COLLECTABLE CARD GAMES AND EXPANSIONS

ROLEPLAYING SYSTEMS

BOARD GAMES, MINIATURE SYSTEMS

The Scores

Everything reviewed in arcane gets a mark out of 10. Here's a guide to what the individual marks represent...

10/10
Perfect. There's simply nothing better.

9/10
Excellent, a classic. Highly recommended.

8/10
Very good, with few problems. Recommended.

7/10
Good, but not exceptional.

6/10
Above average, but not without problems.

5/10
Average, or a mixture of good and bad.

4/10
Below average, but not without merit.

3/10
Poor, crucially flawed in some way.

2/10
Very poor, should be avoided.

1/10
Appallingly bad, no redeeming features at all.

the gaming magazine

arcane reviews THIS MONTH

Shadowrun Companion

on page 62

Packed full of new rules and advice on every aspect of the *Shadowrun* world.

Mummy

on page 64

Discover the truth behind the *real* immortals of the World of Darkness.

Brainware Blowout

on page 60

Everything you'll ever need to run the net in *Cyberpunk 2020*...

arcane SEAL OF APPROVAL

Each month we select one special product most deserving of your money and the coveted **arcane** accolade. This month, however, despite some great releases nothing was sufficiently outstanding.

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Rache Bartmoss' Brainware

cyberpunk's nethacker supremo hosts a gala cavalcade of cutting edge software and hard tech.

Dead men do tell tales. And what's more, in *Cyberpunk 2020* they also run riot across the Internet, making killer software in their spare time and spamming the hell out of netrunners too slow to get out of their way. Yes, Rache Bartmoss, the *Cyberpunk* universe's cryogenically-frozen, Net-bound equivalent of Harlan Ellison, is back once more after being pronounced dead in *Rache Bartmoss' Guide to the Net.*

The newest supplement for R Talsorian Games' grim near-future RPG, *Brainware Blowout* is only the second book to cater for the game's netrunner character class. Usually given the traditional cleric's 'stand at the back until we need you' treatment, *Brainware Blowout* empowers the netrunners and tops up the scattered material available for them, putting it all under one cover for the first time. Unlike the previous gear compilations – such as the cover-all-bases *Chromebooks* or the rather slack *Blackhand's Street Weapons* – this supplement includes new rules and some slick conversion material, which adopts lots of tasty stuff from the Wizards of the Coast CCG *Netrunner* (**arcane** 6, 9/10) and provides the netrunner player character with some real teeth and claws.

Bartmoss hosts the book in his own acerbic style, dropping the odd barbed comment here and there, but he keeps enough distance to allow the text to concentrate on the rules mechanics and stat-mongering. *Brainware Blowout* is a shopper's paradise for netrunners. All the Netty gear from the basic rules, *Guide to the Net* and *Chromebooks* are listed – sans open Full Borg suit from *Chromebook 3*, the omission of which is explained – and it comes complete with a ten-page index, which offers a thumbnail précis of it all. Design and construction rules for cyberdecks are represented, as is some expansion on the role of personal computers in the *2020* world. A new type of computer system, the Mini-Frame, is also introduced. The software section takes up most of the supplement, beginning with a reprint of the program design from the basic rules and the 'demon' program material from *Chromebook 3*.

"Brainware Blowout is an excellent resource for Cyberpunk... It's almost an essential purchase for any dedicated Netrunner player."

A welcome new rules option also arrives in the form of Program Upgrades. One of the more unrealistic elements of *Cyberpunk's* netrunning material is the static nature of the programs it uses. Despite the fact that the game's universe time-line has been running for over seven 'years', a 2013 edition Hammer program is still practically the same as a 2020 edition. As any Windows 95 user knows, real-life software just ain't like that. With the upgrade rules, the system addresses the problem of program degradation over time, giving them a set shelf life and cumulative minus modifiers for age. Purchasing upgrades keeps software 'fresh' and also gives the referee a sneaky way to hit netrunners harder, or to siphon off their hard-earned eurodollars. The remainder of the initial section is a program shopping list, with the addition of some Bartmoss-created specials to tantalise players.

But the main draw for *Brainware Blowout* comes with the conversion of the programs and materials created for the *Netrunner* CCG for *Cyberpunk* usage. While not everything from the CCG makes the crossover – those of you looking for *I Got a Rock* will be disappointed – all the tools and interesting NPCs have been brought into the fold. The main concern for refs, however, is that many of *Netrunner's* cards are extremely powerful, and in the hands of unruly players could become very difficult to manage for a low-level campaign.

The conversion section also has some new rules tweaks, such as self-modifying code and ambush programs, as well as industrial-strength tech such as the Emergency Self Construct. There's even a tip of the hat to Atlas Games' cool playground fighting

TECH-HEADS

Netrunners are the high-tech hackers of the *Cyberpunk 2020* roleplaying system, who connect their brains to their computers via Direct Neural Interfaces to get the fastest response time. Of course, this also means that their precious grey matter is vulnerable to the nasty protection programs they encounter...

ON THE CARDS

Brainware Blowout is one of the first roleplaying supplements to include rules for using a collectable card game during play, but with more and more RPG-inspired CCGs coming out, it probably won't be the last.

Blowout

CCG *Lunch Money,* with a program of the same name. As well as a few pages of hardware, the chapter converts nine of *Netrunner's* Sysop card personalities into full-blown NPCs, complete with background info and biographies.

Brainware Blowout is an excellent resource for *Cyberpunk,* provided the netrunning element of the game is important to your campaign. It's almost an essential purchase for any dedicated *Netrunner* player, if only for the fact that you have all the program and hardware listings in one place for easy access. If you already own the *Chromebooks* and *Guide to the Net,* a good half of this book is stuff you already have, but the *Netrunner* gear conversions make the price of doubling up worth it.

Like looking through a book of well-made *D&D* traps, there are some here you just can't wait to let loose on somebody. If you're a *Netrunner* player and you want to try *Cyberpunk,* this isn't a bad place to start, and if you want to combine the two, it's all you need. However, there are no vital rules in here, so if you don't need it, don't buy it.

Other than the imbalance in some of the programs, and the fact that some others are rather redundant, the only downside is that the inner text is printed in black and white – this is fine for the line drawings, but wastes the dynamic visual impact of the reprinted art from the card game. Colour would have increased the price, but a few pages of art would have added more atmosphere. After all, as Bartmoss proves, the Netscape is nothing if not colourful.

VITAL INFO

title: *Rache Bartmoss' Brainware Blowout*

system: a sourcebook for *Cyberpunk*

price: £7.99

publisher: R Talsorian Games

001 510 549 1373

released: out now

e-mail: rtgl@best.com

web site: http://www.best.com/~rtgl/

stacked decks

One of the hits of the CCG world, *Netrunner* has proven a good seller. Now the *Cyberpunk* team at R Talsorian has melded *Netrunner* and *Cyberpunk* into one with *Brainware Blowout,* and while the majority of the coverage converts new material created for *Netrunner* into *Cyberpunk* RPG terms, there are also a few interesting spins on how to use your box of cards with the pencil and paper game.

A chapter providing hints on how to adapt Agenda cards from *Netrunner's* corporation deck or Runner cards as campaign spurs is provided, as are tips on adapting the cards to provide quickie datafortresses in-situ, using them as adventure generators or as an adjunct to, or replacement for, the *Cyberpunk* netrunning rules. A rules variant called Sysop War can be called in to allow runners to fight face-to-face with the CCG's Corporate Sysops as NPCs, using the stats the book provides for them elsewhere.

The best use of the CCG comes in the new *Netrunner Prime* rules system. This takes out the refereed netrunning rules from the RPG and uses an adapted version of the CCG. Effectively, the ref can set up the Corporate datafort and turn the netrunner PC loose on it while continuing the real-world game with the other PCs. While this is a neat idea which helps to dispose of the drag-time, non-netted PCs suffer when a netrun occurs in *Cyberpunk.*

also available...

A lot of the material here has already appeared in the *Guide to the Net* and some of the *Chromebook* range of sourcebooks, but there's plenty of new stuff as well. If you're looking for more inspiration for netrunning gear and programs, and don't mind a spot of conversion, you should try *Virtual Realities 2.0* for *Shadowrun* or *GURPS Cyberpunk.*

The Final Verdict

"Despite the repeated material, *Brainware Blowout* is a must for any *Cyberpunk 2020* referee with a netrunner character in his group, and the card listings make it both a useful resource for players of the *Netrunner* CCG and a perfect bridge between the card game and the roleplaying system."

Jim Swallow

Score 8/10

The Shadowrun Companion: Beyond the Shadows

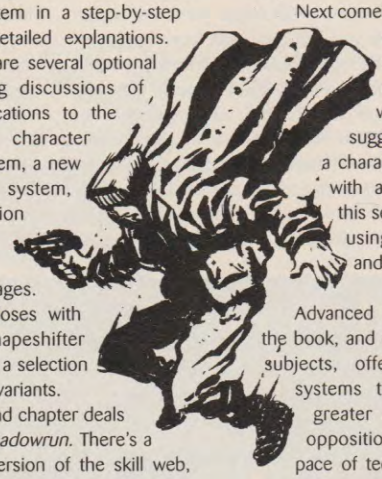
expand the horizons of your *shadowrun* game with the latest release from FASA.

No matter how thorough the designers are, it's inevitable that the basic rules for a roleplaying game will never be able to cover every possible situation that may arise during play. When a system is successful, leading to groups with long-running campaigns that push the boundaries of the game, the situation is even worse because any lacks or inadequacies in the original rules will become more and more apparent. Likewise, it seems almost impossible to write rules in such a way that everyone will be able to understand them.

As such it's hardly a surprise that a game such as *Shadowrun,* which has proved consistently popular ever since its original release in 1989 (rating 8th in our Top 50 roleplaying games survey, **arcane** 14), has generated a vast amount of questions from both new and old players alike. Although there have been numerous sourcebooks and supplements expanding and clarifying the more complex issues of the system, such as magic and the matrix, the basics of the game have remained largely unchanged – and unexplained.

Beyond the Shadows is an attempt to address some of these basic issues, and offer expansions and clarifications to many areas of the game. The book covers a great deal of ground in a variety of ways.

The first section deals with character generation, one of the most important aspects of any roleplaying system. It begins by stressing both the flexibility of the *Shadowrun* system, and the importance of developing a strong concept for the character, before going on to determine the game statistics. It then goes through the basic character generation system in a step-by-step fashion with detailed explanations. Following this are several optional rules, including discussions of various modifications to the standard character generation system, a new points-based system, and a selection of special advantages and disadvantages. The chapter closes with rules for shapeshifter characters, and a selection of metahuman variants.



The second chapter deals with skills in *Shadowrun.* There's a new, revised version of the skill web, and some optional rules that alter the way it's used. This is followed by some optional new dice pools, and new rules for training skills.

Chapter three is a document from the Fuchi megacorporation advising its managers on how to go about hiring shadowrunners, with many comments from 'real' 'runners. It makes for an interesting read, and is designed to give the referee some ideas about how the corps deal with shadowruns.

Next comes a fairly in-depth look at characters' contacts and enemies in the world of *Shadowrun.* As well as new rules and suggestions for dealing with a character's friends and those with a grudge against them, this section includes notes on using them in adventures and campaigns.

The fifth chapter, Advanced Rules, is the largest in the book, and covers a wide variety of subjects, offering new rules and systems to deal with them in greater depth. Karma, magic, opposition, the ever-changing pace of technology and character retirement are all covered, as well as clarifications for other parts of the rules.

The last two chapters deal with *Shadowrun* in a more general fashion. There's a long and interesting discussion on running the game from the referee's

NEW SPECIES

The new metahuman variants included in the *Companion* cover 'subspecies' of the standard metahuman races, such as Minotaurs (Mediterranean Trolls), Gnomes (a smaller, European sub-group of Dwarves) and Hobgoblins (which are Middle Eastern Orcs).

EXPLAIN IT TO ME!

One thing that the *Companion* still lacks is a clear and detailed examination of System Identification Numbers (SINs), and the consequences of being SINless (as most shadowrunners are assumed to be). Whether or not this is important is largely a matter of the style of your group and the tastes of your referee, but it would still be nice to have it explained...

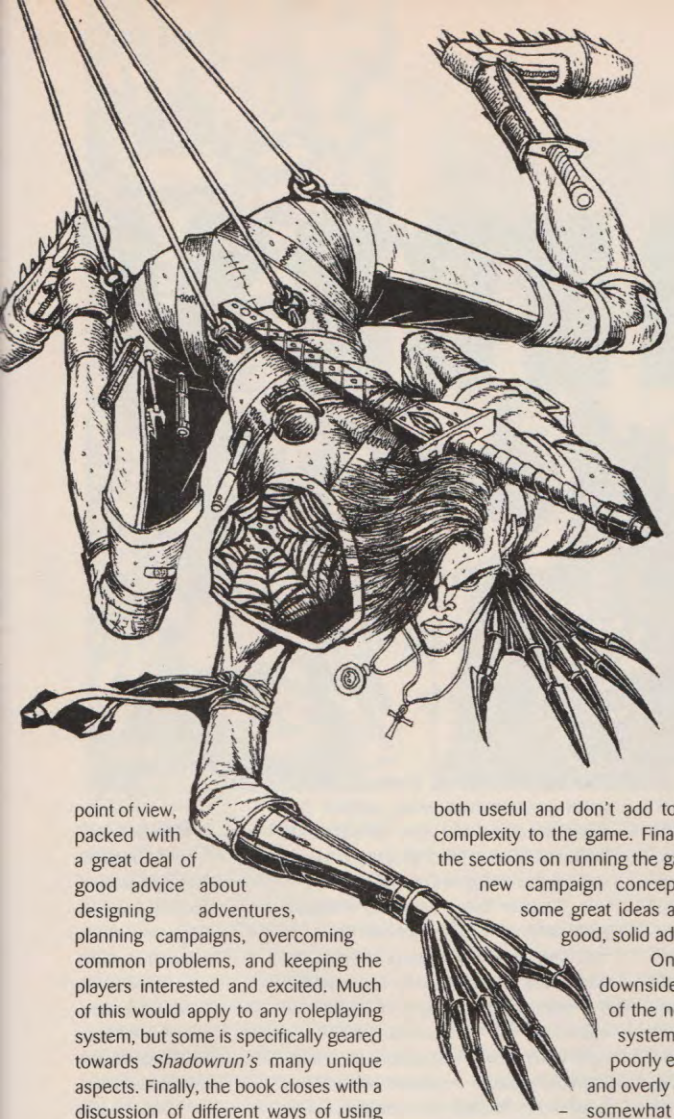
into the light?

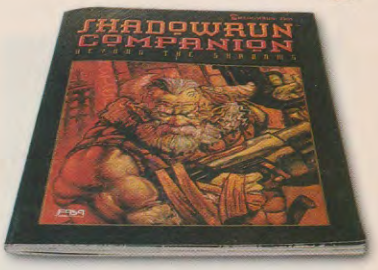
One of the inherent limitations of *Shadowrun* has always been the game's assumption that the player characters are themselves members of a team of shadowrunners, performing dangerous and illegal missions for corporations and individuals. While this simple premise gives the game a focus – particularly useful for new players and referees – eventually experienced groups can find it restrictive and limiting.

The last chapter of *The Shadowrun Companion,* Alternative Campaign Concepts, offers suggestions for experienced referees to overcome this shortcoming. The *Shadowrun* gameworld is overflowing with potential as a setting for all kinds of adventure, and this section looks at six different premises for a different kind of *Shadowrun* campaign.

Included are notes on campaigns based around medicine, journalism, espionage (either government or corporate), law enforcement, magic and street gangs. Each style of campaign is considered in turn, together with hints and suggestions for the type of plots and adventures that are suited to these different groups, the types of characters that would be suited to them and the kind of opposition they might come up against.

Each of these campaign concepts allows players the chance to experience life in the Sixth World from a different perspective than your typical shadowrunner, while preserving the unique blend of cyberpunk and fantasy that's a central part of *Shadowrun's* atmosphere and appeal. Although actually running one of these campaigns will still take a lot of work from the referee, the chapter does provide a good starting point from which to build, and includes some interesting ideas. The section on street gangs even includes some sample gangs that could easily be adapted for use in a 'normal' *Shadowrun* game.





VITAL INFO

title:	*The Shadowrun Companion*
system:	a supplement for *Shadowrun*
price:	£10.99
publisher:	FASA
	001 312 243 5660
released:	out now
web site:	http://www.FASA.com/

point of view, packed with a great deal of good advice about designing adventures, planning campaigns, overcoming common problems, and keeping the players interested and excited. Much of this would apply to any roleplaying system, but some is specifically geared towards *Shadowrun's* many unique aspects. Finally, the book closes with a discussion of different ways of using the *Shadowrun* gameworld to run new types and styles of game.

The Shadowrun Companion is a somewhat curious beast, being by its very nature varied in what it covers. Unfortunately, although much of the book is well written and designed, it's somewhat variable in quality.

both useful and don't add too much complexity to the game. Finally, both the sections on running the game and new campaign concepts have some great ideas and offer good, solid advice.

On the downside, many of the new rules systems are poorly explained and overly complex – somewhat ironic, considering that one of the aims of the book is to clarify the game. The worst offenders are the new training rules, which are hard to follow, adding only to the bookkeeping required, and the rules in the contacts section. These are also far too complex for a system that's supposed to merely aid in roleplaying

"*The Shadowrun Companion* is a curious beast... Although much of the book is well written and designed, it's somewhat variable in quality."

The new points-based character generation rules are excellent; both well-balanced and far more flexible than the original 'priorities' system – *Shadowrun* has been crying out for a system like this ever since it first appeared. The new metahuman variants and shapeshifter rules are also a welcome addition, offering yet more choice for players and referees alike.

Likewise, the new skill web is well designed. The section on the corps' views of shadowrunners is interesting, if not particularly surprising. The section on contacts and enemies also has many good ideas and clears up some long-running debates about this most important aspect of a character. The advanced rules have some good and bad points, but in the main are a character's interactions with his sources of information.

There are also some problems meshing some of the new mechanics with the 'reality' of the gameworld. These are most apparent in the 'State of the Art' rules, which are designed to keep the characters on their toes and help the ref drain them of any excess wealth. Rich characters are always a problem in *Shadowrun,* and so in principle these are handy rules. The idea is that every now and then a new breakthrough in technology makes existing equipment obsolete, and thus the characters have to buy new stuff. However, justifying some of the changes is difficult. While most players will accept that new ammunition can make their armour redundant, leading to a need to upgrade it, it's harder to convince them that an advanced suspension system on new cars has made their cars harder to handle.

The biggest problem with *The Shadowrun Companion,* though, is that for many fans of the game it's going to be about five years too late. Any dedicated *Shadowrun* group will probably have already come up with their own rules for the situations covered here.

Nonetheless, there is a lot of useful stuff here. Less experienced *Shadowrun* refs will find it very handy, but those with more experience will have to weigh up whether they really need enough of this stuff to make it worthwhile.

Also available...

By its very nature, *The Shadowrun Companion* is unique – very little of the material here has been covered in previous supplements and sourcebooks. There have been several books dealing with more complex elements of the *Shadowrun* system, however, including *Virtual Realities 2.0* (**arcane** 3), a must-have for any group including a Decker character. *Awakenings* (**arcane** 4) and *The Grimoire* are both required reading for any magician character.

The Final Verdict

"A mixed bag of new and expanded rules, campaign suggestions and advice, *The Shadowrun Companion* is full of interesting and potentially handy stuff for referees new to the game or just starting a new campaign. Experienced refs with an existing group, though, will probably have already devised their own rules to cover much of what is included here."

Andy Butcher

Score 7/10

Mummy
Second Edition

oh, mummies can certainly die. but they always, but always, get better again.

Let's get one thing straight, before we even start. We are not talking about shambling monsters wrapped in bandages here, whatever the cover of the book may imply. Oh no. We are talking about the true immortals of White Wolf's *World of Darkness*, the Mummies.

Mummies, or the Reborn as they like to call themselves, cannot die. Or rather, they can, but it's a somewhat impermanent state for them. At the moment of their first death, the Great Rite was performed over their still warm corpse, preserving the body, and allowing the soul the time it needed to gather enough strength to bring the mummy to rebirth.

From there on the character is trapped in an endless cycle of life and death. And I mean trapped. There is virtually no way to completely destroy a mummy. As memories of earlier lives grow ever fainter, how does the character cope and continue to find purpose for a life he or she cannot escape?

That's the core of *Mummy*. Granted, a few familiar White Wolf themes are thrown in for good measure – elements of the vampires' Jyhad and the werewolves' battle against the Wyrm, known to mummies as Apophis, for example. But at its heart the game is about the trials of immortality.

Chapter one slips into the familiar White Wolf in-character narration to give us the history of the Shemsu-heru, or Egyptian mummies, on which the game focuses. A good part of this is presented in a fake parchment style, complete with appropriate typeface. While this looks lovely, it's heavy going on the eyes when you try to read it.

The second chapter gives us further detail on mummies today, written in a more objective style. Also discussed are the relationships with the other creatures stalking the World of Darkness.

Chapter three presents character generation in a style familiar from the main *World of Darkness* rulebooks, but with some relevant twists. For example, the mummy's occupation in its first life becomes an important factor in determining the allocation of Traits. Thankfully, would-be power-gamers have been nicely headed off at the pass with a box-out explaining why most of the other supernaturals can't become mummies.

Contained in chapter four are the magic rules. Mummy magic is called Hekau, and is perhaps the most powerful form found in the World of Darkness, bar the true Magick of Mages. In this chapter evidence of the authors' research into ancient Egyptian culture comes through. Each of the Hekau paths has an Egyptian

WHERE'S MY MUMMY? White Wolf messed up – it forgot to include the character sheet in the book, despite squeezing in three house ads. Those of you with access to the Internet can download the sheet from the White Wolf web site. The rest of you will have to make use of pen and paper.

LEVEL PITCH The word 'mummy' derives from the Persian term for pitch or bitumen, which was used in the mummification process. Pass the embalming fluid, dear...

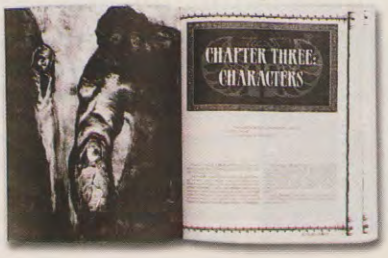
Look, is this a roleplaying game or not?

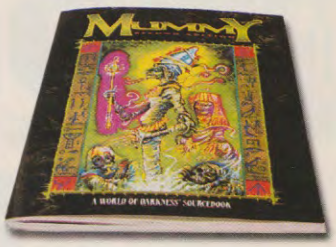
Mummy Second Edition **has the rather dubious distinction of being almost a roleplaying game in its own right – but not quite. It's got background, character creation rules, magic and storyteller advice. So what's it lacking? Oh, yes, the little matter of a system.**

While mummies are an entirely different type of creature from those presented in the main five *Storyteller* system games, you need at least one of them to run the game. In all honesty, you probably need quite a bit more than that. For running a mummy's life, either *Vampire: The Masquerade, Werewolf: The Apocalypse* or *Mage: The Ascension* is needed. You can probably get away with using *Changeling: The Dreaming* if you really try.

However if you are planning to play through the time a mummy spends dead, and living in the Underworld, *Wraith: The Oblivion* is absolutely essential. This game details the settings and systems you need to competently portray the strange atmosphere of the Tempest, where the mummies' way station in the underworld, Amenti, is to be found.

Beyond that, many of the veritable library of supplements White Wolf has produced are really going to be needed. *Freak Legion* (reviewed way back in arcane 2) makes a useful source of suitably Apophis-tainted opposition, for example.





VITAL INFO

title:	*Mummy Second Edition*
system:	a *World of Darkness* sourcebook
price:	£10.99
publisher:	White Wolf
	001 404 292 1819
released:	out now
web site:	http://www.white-wolf.com

And the players said...

Martyn: "It's a very interesting challenge playing a millennia-old character."

Therese: "It's good, but it can be hard to find a motivation for your character."

Chris: "Mummy! Where's it going to end – Nessie?"

Also available...

Other than really high-level fantasy games, there's *Kult*, which leans more towards Christian mythology than Egyptian, or *Nephilim*, which can be even harder work for the referee. Within the World of Darkness, there's another group given a similar almost-a-game-but-not-quite treatment to mummies, in *World of Darkness: Gypsies*.

The Final Verdict

"There is potential for a very interesting game here. But the limited space it's been given means that a lot of work will have to go into making the most of it."

Adam Tinworth

Score 7/10

feel to it, adding immeasurably to the atmosphere of the game.

Chapter five deals in depth with Rebirth and the time the mummy spends in the underworld between lives, while chapter six gives guidance on running mummy chronicles.

Mummy first appeared very early in the annals of the World of Darkness, not long after the original release of *Vampire: The Masquerade,* but before the release of any of the other games in the *Storyteller* series. It was overdue for a revamp to bring it in line with the changes in the system and setting.

One of the most significant was the development of the Underworld through two editions of *Wraith: The Oblivion*. When a mummy dies, two spirits, the ka and the ba, leave the body (or khat). The ka stays in *Wraith's* Shadowlands to guard the body, while the ba travels deep into the Tempest, the heart of the Underworld, to regain enough energy to regenerate the khat and be reborn once more. This period of the mummy's existence is more detailed than in the first edition, and borrows heavily from *Wraith* continuity and systems to do it.

But that's not to say that there aren't many links with other *World of Darkness* races. Mummies were created by a mage to fight a vampire, with werewolves, werecats and even werecrocodiles for goodness' sake, as allies. Oh, and some changelings pop in for a cameo appearance early in the mummies' history.

Mummies have become the ultimate crossover beasties, deeply mired in the extensive continuity that has been built up. Because of this, if you aren't familiar with the scope of White Wolf's products, you probably aren't going to find this easy going.

Also counting against the book is much of the art, which fails to carry through the Egyptian feel that the text excels at. Another problem is the amount of work that has been left to the referee. This is highlighted in the otherwise excellent Storytelling section. Instead of presenting us with a sample scenario or setting, there is lots of guidance on the ways that the Reborn can be used.

But fitting what is basically an entire game into around 140 pages means sacrificing detail. While the book mentions that there are many types of Reborn, little development is made of them. And while the culture of the Shemsu-heru is given in good depth, their role in the modern world is vague.

So, in other words, a lot of time and effort is being asked of the referee. A lot is asked of the players, too. Rather than creating characters with a few decades of history, they're creating characters with millennia of experience, which is a far more involving task.

So, if you invest a lot of time in developing your campaign and characters, you have a challenging and involving time ahead of you. But if you just want some quick and easy roleplaying, you won't find it here.

"We are not talking about shambling monsters wrapped in bandages here... At its heart the game is about the trials of immortality."

son from the cult he has joined – and provides full game statistics for all of the major characters featured in the story. While it's well designed and easy to follow, it is a tough adventure with a nasty main baddie, and this may cause some problems for new groups.

The Dime Novel format has a lot going for it, though – the short story complements the adventure by offering roleplaying suggestions for the main characters and helping to create an atmosphere on which the referee can draw when running the session. Pinnacle intends to release a lot of these books, and they offer potential new writers a neat format with which to work. As long as the standard remains as high as this, they may well prove to be very successful indeed.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Shadows of the Empire: Planets Guide
A background book for the *Star Wars* RPG
$15 (£11 approx)
West End Games
001 717 253 6990
Out now

Shadows of the Empire: Planets Guide

This book is loosely adapted from Steve Perry's *Shadows of the Empire* novel, which is supposed to fill in the gap between *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. However, there is no real need to be familiar with the book to use this supplement, because what we have here is simply some chunky outlines describing four of the planets featured in the story. Rodia is another jungle-covered world, supposedly the home planet of Greedo, the bounty hunter who Han Solo makes short work of in *Star Wars*. Bothawi is the home of the civilised Bothans, who have made spying a racial speciality – they are mentioned in passing in *Return of the Jedi* as having brought the data about the New Death Star to Mon Motha. Kothlis is a Bothan colony world, and finally, Vergesso is a planetoid in the middle of an asteroid field, and is therefore a hide-out for pirates, privateers, slavers, PCs and so on.

Each section has a nice mixture of generic overview and specific local colour, and each planet has got at least one scenario outline attached to it – I liked the idea of throwing a new group of player characters together by having them caught up in the evacuation of Vergesso, straight after Darth Vader destroys the place.

It's a nice little book that could form the basis for a fun campaign.

Andrew Rilstone Score 6/10

Shadowfist Players' Guide Volume 1

Daedalus Entertainment's *Shadowfist* collectable card game (**arcane** 1) has always been one of our favourites here in the **arcane** office. It's a fast-moving, action-packed game where the tables can turn very quickly, and it's a lot of fun to play. This, the first players' guide for the game, takes an in-depth look at both the rules and a wide selection of the individual cards, offering hints, advice and strategies for winning.

The book is split into four main sections, interspersed with background information about the setting of the game and the factions that are fighting in the Secret War. The first, Gunslinging 101, deals with the basics of the game, covering several rules clarifications and important concepts. Also included here is Iron & Silk, a simple yet informative discussion of basic *Shadowfist* tactics.

Following from this is the most up-to-date version of the Frequently Asked Questions list for *Shadowfist*, which should clear up any rules queries you may have. Daedalus will be producing an updated rulebook with the upcoming *Throne War* expansion, but in the meantime, everything is included here.

Lastly come two 'card by card' sections, one covering the basic set and the other looking at the *Flashpoint* expansion. Each section picks out a wide range of the most important, useful, powerful or underused cards from each set, and offers notes and advice on how to get the best out of them.

Shadowfist Players' Guide Volume 1
A supplement for *Shadowfist*
£9.95
Daedalus Entertainment
001 206 232 2519
Out now

The Shadowfist Players' Guide: Volume 1 is just what any *Shadowfist* player has probably been looking for ever since the game was released. The rules clarifications alone are worth the asking price – combine this with all the great tips and hints on playing the game and you've got a very handy book indeed. Players of *Feng Shui* – the roleplaying game based on the same setting as *Shadowfist* (**arcane** 1) – will also find a lot of interesting background material here, and if they don't play *Shadowfist*, this may well make them realise what they're missing.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Heroes of Steel

Heroes of Steel is the first boxed expansion for the *Dragonlance* campaign world (**arcane** 11) and, like the main boxed set, it comprises two A5 books and a colourful map.

Book one expands on the *Fifth Age* rules by presenting guidelines on complicated actions. Shortcuts through unfamiliar territory, charging into combat, shield slamming an opponent and group activities can all be found. New weapons tables are included and both these and the rules are simple to grasp. Continuing with the focus on roleplaying over rules, book one includes bonus and penalty modifiers to inflict on your group should anyone not act in character.

However, *Heroes* is mainly a warriors sourcebook, and the first book delves into the roles available for fighters including the knightly orders of Takhisis, Solamnia and The Legion. Advantages and disadvantages accompany each, and all are highly playable. Book two – The Rising Storm – is part one of a series of adventures, called Dragons of a New Age, that take place concurrently with the first series of *Fifth Age* novels.

Heroes of Steel
A boxed expansion for *AD&D Dragonlance Fifth Age*
£10.99
TSR
01223 212517
Out now

The adventure is well planned, easily played and exciting, but it's over far too soon and should have been developed into a detailed campaign.

David Cornford Score 7/10

The 23rd Letter

Do you know what your children are?

The 23rd Letter is a game of wonder and paranoia set in the very near future. It's aiming at a flavour rather reminiscent of *The X-Files* – but then, what isn't nowadays?

Seems that, all over the world, children are being born with psychic powers. But at least three types of organisation have an interest in these new paranormals. The so-called Powers are quasi-autonomous off-shoots of large multinational corporations, who want to control the psychics for their own, selfish ends. The Projects are secretive organisations set up by the governments to further the political and economic objectives of their nation. Some of these Projects are thought to have run genetic engineering programs that went horribly wrong and produced 'terrata' – hugely powerful, not-quite human psychics. Some of them may still be alive... Finally, the Network is a loose organisation of independent psychics. Players can be agents of one of the Projects, or members of a cell of the Network. Either way, they are probably relatively ordinary people, caught up in a frightening, secret war in which no-one knows the rules.

VITAL INFO
A roleplaying game
£7.99
Crucible Design
01846 664318
Out now
crucibledesign@hotmail.com
http://www.tripod.com/~Crucible Design/index.html

The game seems to be intended for the sort of gaming group who like to be told, 'Okay. You are a cell of psis. Deal with it,' rather than be led through a complex scenario. The excellent list of scenario hooks (over 40) tends to support this – fairly simple situations which could be developed in a number of different ways. You are in the centre of town and you see a small child exhibiting psychic powers. What do you do? (They also have an excellent sense of the paranoid about them. Don't be too sure the child won't turn out to be the brother you never knew you had, or a clone.)

This is a very powerful, evocative and original setting, full of roleplaying potential. I do, however, think that the writing is stronger on atmosphere than on detail – as if the writers sometimes forget that we don't know their world as well as they do. Rather too much space in what is quite a small book is taken up with an adequate but undistinguished rules system, and some stats to go with it. I'd much sooner have heard a lot more about the setting than find out what the range of an Ingram Mac-10 is or the typical equipment of a soldier. Finally, the 'how to referee' section is somewhat mired in generalities, ritual injunctions to improvise and keep the action moving, rather than offering specific strategies for running a sinister game of paranoia and conspiracy.

These criticisms aside, however, this is an impressive first product. If the forthcoming *Projects* background book lives up to its promise, then *The 23rd Letter* might turn out to be the stuff that cults are made of.

Oh yeah. The twenty-third letter of the Greek alphabet is 'psi' – in case you were wondering.

Andrew Rilstone Score 8/10

Sick Little Sagas

Sick Little Sagas
A sourcebook for the *D6 System* or *Masterbook*
£9.99
West End Games
001 770 934 9131
Out now

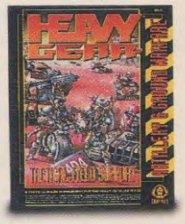
Neither *Masterbook* nor the *D6 System* have been particularly big sellers for West End Games, but the company continues to produce a great deal of supplementary material for them – if only all games systems were this well supported.

Sick Little Sagas is a collection of four adventures designed for use with *The World of Tales from the Crypt* sourcebook. The first, Bad Day at Hanging Hill, is set in the Wild West and deals with a less than sane farmer and the strange things he's breeding on his ranch. It begins with the players about to be hung, and things go downhill for them from there on. Next comes The Medusa Tree, which features a range of weird events all seemingly related to the Delaware River – or to something lying beneath its placid surface. The third adventure, ...But Fear Itself, casts the players as new inmates in an unsavoury mental asylum where the patients have more to fear than their own mental problems. Finally comes Tracks of my Fears, in which a seemingly normal train journey takes a strange turn, and the players find themselves on a non-stop trip to somewhere they don't want to go.

Although designed for *Tales from the Crypt*, all of these adventures could be fairly simply converted to a variety of horror roleplaying systems. All of them make use of the 'Shell Body' game mechanic, which allows players of *The World of Tales from the Crypt* to jump into the roles of many different characters, but this isn't a problem if they're to be played as one-shot adventures, and it doesn't take much to adjust the stories to fit them into an ongoing campaign. Good stuff.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Heavy Gear Tactical Field Support



Heavy Gear Tactical Field Support
A sourcebook for *Heavy Gear*
£11.99
Dream Pod 9
001 514 523 1350
Out now

Subtitled *Artillery & Ground Support*, the *Tactical Field Support* supplement is slanted towards battle gaming players of the *Heavy Gear* system, and it covers all the stuff that blows up in the war zones of the future – detailed rules for artillery and minefields are rounded out with a whole tank-load of extra bits and pieces, which while useful in parts, gives the impression of a grab-bag of stuff that just didn't fit in anywhere else. Once again, the 'skirmish' scale rules are re-presented, in a slightly expanded version of those previously published in *Life on Terra Nova* and the *Duellist's Handbook* (**arcane** 13) – a tad redundant if you already have them, but the optional rules do have some great gems that even the balance. Mechanics for morale are mixed in with curios such as field engineering, terrain types and extra combat tweaks.

The de rigeur engineering section introduces new weapons – artillery, guns and missiles – and new vehicle Perks. Eight non-*Heavy Gear* campaign outlines are presented, complete with a 'starting point' adventure seed, character type suggestions and a few variables to make things interesting. The remainder of the *Tactical Field Support* book is filled out with stock NPC types and 25 battlefield support vehicles. More thinly backgrounded than many of the other *Heavy Gear* supplements, this is targeted at the blood and thunder players running a hard-edged war campaign, and for those who get a thrill from the big guns this will supply it in abundance.

Otherwise, *Tactical Field Support* lacks cohesion. Unless you plan to run a *Heavy Gear* game where the player characters are an artillery crew, you can live without this narrow-focussed supplement; while the additional rules make a good try at expanding the subject matter, it still falls short of the mark.

Jim Swallow Score 5/10

Heretics

don't look too hard into the dark, you may not like what you see.

VITAL INFO
A sourcebook for *STOCS-lite*
£5.99
Wasteland Games
01265 824261
Out now
wast@indigo.ie
http://indigo.ie/~waste

You and I, we're the lucky ones – we're Real, and we have no perception of the grim truth, the fragile skin that is our reality, separating our world, that of sunshine and hope, from the world of the Hidden, that of darkness and a cold more penetrating that the sharpest dagger. But some are not so lucky – some have suffered trauma that has opened their eyes, widening the valve of reality, letting in the darkness that is the other side.

And these poor unfortunates are the Heretics, humans that have crossed over the boundary of the Real, and have entered into the twilight world of the Hidden. Here foul creatures lurk, awaiting the time when they can cross over into the world of humanity, themselves becoming Real and fleeing the dark world from whence they came.

But the only way that the Hidden can cross the bridge into Reality is by slaying the Real, by killing humans. The Heretics, those who can see the Hidden, are aware of the Hidden's foul plans, and so they must stop these defiling acts, if only they could overcome the insanity which grips them. Life for a Heretic is a constant effort, maintaining the status quo of their own minds as they combat the Hidden and the authorities, which see them as no more than a threat to the rest of the normal, fully Real humans.

Players within the game of *Heretics*, itself a sourcebook and campaign world for the minimalist *STOCS-lite* roleplaying game, adopt the roles of the Heretics from which the game derives its name. The author suggests that the referee doesn't detail exactly what's going on when the game begins, which is good advice. Each character should develop a significantly debilitating insanity of some description, an insanity which acts as a passport to the world of the Hidden, enabling them to see the foul creatures that inhabit that realm. This insanity should develop slowly, with its existence only gradually coming to the attention of the player – he may, for example, roleplay a fight scene with a ghoul from the realm of the Hidden, only to discover that observers saw him merely flailing in mid-air, fighting an invisible opponent. Did he really have the battle? Or is this evidence of his sanity slowly slipping away?

Running *Heretics* sessions is not easy, and cannot be recommended for inexperienced referees. It's made difficult because so much character knowledge must be kept separate from that of the player, and because writing scenarios for the game is demanding. The Hidden have their own agenda, which mostly revolves around killing humans, but scenarios should not just be excuses for a scrap between characters and the Hidden – this game is supposed to be far more subtle than that.

There's no doubt that this is a better sourcebook for *STOCS-lite* than the previous *MAJI* book (**arcane** 2), but it does require a lot of work on behalf of the ref. The author has managed to convey a lurid kind of horror, but a lot is still left up to the ref's imagination, especially in terms of how to write scenarios for the game and how to craft a campaign. A follow-up scenario supplement would help, and hopefully that's what we'll get with the release of *The One True London* later in the year.

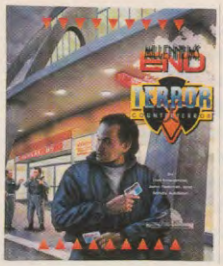
Paul Pettengale Score 6/10

The Terror/ CounterTerror Sourcebook

Set in the rapidly approaching year of 1999, *Millennium's End* is a roleplaying game based on the techno-thriller genre of fiction pioneered by authors such as Frederick Forsyth and Tom Clancy. Players can take on the roles of detectives, spies, special operations agents and so on, fighting against criminals, international conspiracies and more.

Terror/CounterTerror is a sourcebook covering all elements of terrorism in the *Millennium's End* world, including those organisations that fight against it. After the introduction, the book is split into four main sections.

The first, The Threat, gives an overview of terrorism and terrorists, including their philosophies, organisation, methods and contacts. The second chapter, Terrorist Organisations, takes up the bulk of the book and examines 15 terrorist organisations detailing their histories, goals, resources, current activities and more. Following this comes CounterTerrorist Agencies, which gives similar detailed coverage to six of the world's best-known military and civilian anti-terrorist units. The last chapter, Resources, covers terrorist actions and methods, geared towards providing the referee with potential adventure and campaign ideas. It also has a selection of NPCs and some useful maps – a terrorist 'safe house', a training camp and an airliner. Finally, there's an appendix which discusses weapons of mass destruction – favoured by terrorists of all types.



The Terror/CounterTerror Sourcebook
A sourcebook for *Millennium's End*
£10.99
Chameleon Eclectic
001 540 953 1658
Out now

The Terror/CounterTerror Sourcebook is a well-designed mixture of painstaking research and fiction, and provides a wealth of ideas and inspiration. There's more than enough information here to run a whole campaign based around counter-terrorism, or simply to introduce some terrorist actions to an existing game. Even if you don't play *Millennium's End* itself, the bulk of this book could be used in any near-future game to add a harder edge to your stories. The only real drawback is the book's tight focus, but if you want to know how to use terrorism in your games, look no further.

Andy Butcher Score 7/10

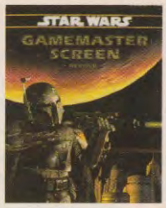
Star Wars Gamemaster Screen Revised

What's a referee to do? All roleplayers are very skilled at upside-down reading, and will stop at nothing to catch a glimpse of your secret notes and thus spoil the game. And don't you find that you are always thumbing through the rulebook, looking for that elusive chart – especially when playing a rules-light game such as *Star Wars?*

Fear not! West End Games has come to our aid, with this innovative device that kills two womp-rats with one energy blast.

It's best described as a sheet of folded cardboard which will nearly stand up on most tables. It can thus be used to provide a sort of barrier – or 'screen', if you will – between the referee's notes and the player's prying eyes. Even better it has writing on both sides of it so that should, for example, a player feel the urge in the middle of the game to find out what a pair of macro-binoculars costs, he can lean across the table and strain to look at the small print. Much less hassle than looking in the rulebook.

But that's not all. You also get a 64-page booklet, presumably to hide behind your new 'screen'. This contains various referee's aids – summaries of skills, attributes of all the starships and standard character types in the games and so forth. There is also a Time Line (presumably intended to demonstrate what a complete dog's dinner the *Star Wars* universe has become) and some new character templates. And all for only eight quid.



Star Wars Gamemaster Screen Revised
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Andrew Rilstone Score 4/10

Steel Deep: The Luna Sourcebook

The latest release for Mayfair's *Underground* roleplaying system turns its attention from the social decay of 21st century Earth to the tourist resort of Luna on the Moon.

Originally designed as an ultra-high security penal colony, and intended to relieve the overcrowding of America's prisons, New Soledad was initially a success. The prison's construction went hand in hand with a change in US law, whereby any sentences of 20 years or more were converted to life without the possibility of parole – on the moon.

Eventually, though, the money ran out. Not even the contributions from corporations granted research space within the facility were enough to justify the huge expense. Then the prisoners revolted and took control.

Steel Deep: The Luna Sourcebook
A sourcebook for *Underground*
£10.99
Mayfair Games
001 847 647 9650
Out now

The US government was faced with a dilemma. Eventually, though, the situation began to stabilise. The government lacked the resources to recapture the prison, and the gangs now controlling it had access to the mass drivers used to throw lunar ore into orbit – with which they could drop a large rock on to Washington. Finally, Luna was recognised as a sovereign nation. Soon afterwards, it opened itself up to the public – as a tourist resort.

Steel Deep is a high-quality supplement that meshes well with the existing background, but expands the options available to referees and players. The history and background of Luna is well thought out, and there's lots of advice for running adventures and campaigns.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Prelude to War

As Thera turns its avaricious eyes towards its former province, what are the odds that Barsaive will ever be the same again?

In roleplaying, gameworlds fall into two main groups – those that remain largely static and unchanged over time, and those that grow and evolve. In many ways, FASA has always been a pioneer of the second approach, following on from the trend set by GDW with the first three editions of *Traveller*, each of which saw the universe change quite radically. The setting and background of both *Shadowrun* and *BattleTech* have developed over time, creating a dynamic gameworld and great potential for epic gaming within it.

The exception has been *Earthdawn*, FASA's fantasy roleplaying system, which has remained fairly static since the game's original release. With *Prelude to War*, though, all that is about to change.

VITAL INFO
A campaign sourcebook for *Earthdawn*
£9.99
FASA
001 312 243 5660
Out now
http://www.FASA.com/

Barsaive, the setting for *Earthdawn*, was once a province of the mighty Theran Empire, and Thera itself has never truly accepted its independent status. Over the course of the past few releases for the game, it's become apparent that this uneasy state of affairs is soon to come to a head. *Prelude to War* covers the events leading up to the coming clash between Thera and its former province.

After an introduction and explanation of how best to use the upcoming war in an ongoing campaign, the book is made up of four sections, each dealing with an event leading to the war, and presenting referees with a mini-campaign in which their players can become embroiled.

The first, The Theran Behemoth, details the arrival in Barsaive of one of Thera's vast stone airships, a herald of the potential war to come. Next comes The King is Dead!, in which King Varulus III of Throal is brutally murdered and the young, inexperienced Crown Prince Neden ascends the throne.

Blaming Thera for the assassination of his father, the new King begins his rule with a vicious assault against Theran forces in the province.

The third story, The Dragon's Daughter, deals with a seemingly minor event – a Theran magician's search for a young girl – that soon draws the attention of Barsaive's Great Dragons, who seem to have their own interests in the mysterious child. Finally comes Rise of the Ork Nation. This deals with the formation of a new political power in southwestern Barsaive, as orks from across the province set up their own 'homeland'. Throughout its history the ork race has been enslaved or discriminated against, and now it intends to gain both power and respect.

As well as detailing these events and the major characters involved in them, each section of *Prelude to War* includes a wide variety of possible adventure plots, and a discussion of how these events will affect the lives of the characters. In many ways this book represents the ideal way for a referee to deal with changes in the gameworld. It presents the information in a way that not only allows the players to become involved in the action, but also enables the referee to tailor the events to their own tastes. Rather than being dictated to by the game designer, the referee here has a lot of choice and control over how his or her campaign proceeds. In short, this is not only a well-designed book packed with possible adventure ideas, it's also something of a must for any regular *Earthdawn* referee.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Liber des Goules

In White Wolf's World of Darkness setting, ghouls are created when a living creature (usually a human, but animals can be made into ghouls as well) drinks the blood of a vampire without first being drained of their own. As long as the ghoul continues to drink regularly, they gain many of the formidable powers of their vampire masters but avoid some of the drawbacks.

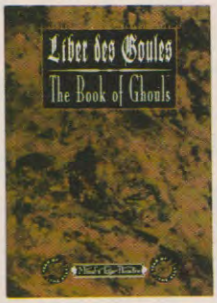
Due to their unique mix of powers, ghouls are of great use to vampires, most importantly because they are unaffected by the rays of the sun and can move around in the open during the day. Unfortunately, due to their lowly status ghouls have traditionally been all but overlooked by players of *The Masquerade*, the vampire-based version of the *Mind's Eye Theatre* live-action roleplaying system. If they are played at all it tends to be by players new to the game, enabling them to learn how it works by taking minor parts.

Liber des Goules aims to change this by emphasising the unique roles that ghouls play in vampire society and offering complete rules for playing these creatures. In addition there are plentiful notes on incorporating ghouls into the plots of adventures.

The book itself first looks at the different types of ghoul, then moves on to rules for character creation. Following this comes a section devoted to roleplaying and storytelling with ghouls. Finally there's an appendix covering animal ghouls which, while not a suitable role for a player, may nonetheless play an important part in a story.

Liber des Goules achieves what it sets out to do with admirable ease. Not only does it help to make ghouls both interesting and challenging to play, it also highlights the roles these creatures can play in a variety of different types of adventure. If you're a keen player or referee of *The Masquerade* looking for something a little different to add to your games, this is a must.

Andy Butcher Score 7/10



Liber des Goules
A supplement for *Mind's Eye Theatre*
£8.99
White Wolf
001 404 292 1819
Out now

Spellfire Reference Guide: Volume 2

At £11.99 the *Spellfire Reference Guide: Volume 2* is £4 more expensive than *Volume 1*, although there are 100 extra pages in the same successful style as its predecessor. It offers updates and clarifications on the 4th edition rules, plus strategies, options, ideas for playing and colour photographs of nearly 1,000 of the available *Spellfire* cards, including promo cards, designers' favourites, and the all-important differences between the 2nd and 3rd editions.

However, although all the cards up to Draconomicon are listed, it is quite surprising that it doesn't include the relevant artwork and card descriptions of the 4th edition, which is by far the most influential of all supplements to date. Therefore, although in essence this tome is a 'must have' product for *Spellfire* collectors and players, the importance of the omitted cards means that a third book is already required just to bring the game up to date.

All players, especially those who enter tournaments, will need to read this publication carefully because it explains which cards cannot be used exactly as the text on them implies. For example, the realm 'Ancient Kalidnay' states that the player may take another turn if it is voluntarily razed, yet the official ruling, according to this latest reference book, is that this ability may only be used once per game, although it doesn't make any such restrictions on the card itself. This ruling is in line with the spirit of *Spellfire* and makes for a more balanced game, though it does screw up a good strategy.

Despite being a must for any serious player this is not without problems. Expect volume three to turn up soon...

Chris Baylis Score 7/10

Spellfire Reference Guide: Volume 2
A supplement for *Spellfire*
£11.99
TSR
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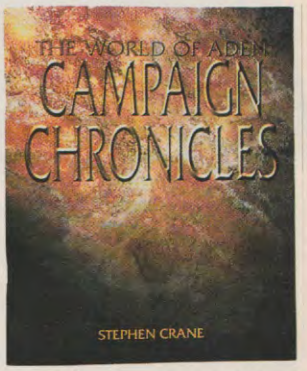
The World of Aden Campaign Chronicles

A companion volume to *The World of Aden* book itself (**arcane** 9), *The World of Aden Campaign Chronicles* expands upon the fantasy world created by software developers SSI for a series of computer roleplaying games. *Aden* features an interesting mixture of traditional fantasy and steampunk elements, and has quite a lot to offer as an alternative setting for a fantasy campaign. *Campaign Chronicles* is intended as a guide for referees wishing to set up a game in Aden, and while intended for use with either the *Masterbook* or *D6 System* rules from West End Games, it can very easily be adapted to a variety of rules systems.

The book covers a wide variety of subjects, beginning with a discussion of the unique atmosphere of Aden and how to make use of it during play, moving through to non-players characters, areas of particular interest from an adventuring point of view, suggestions and advice on



The World of Aden Campaign Chronicles
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Battle Rage

It's fantasy wargaming on the cheap.

Battle Rage is the wargaming equivalent of a 'one size fits all' boiler suit. It's cheap, generic, suits most occasions but doesn't quite fit. It certainly has an ambitious plan, setting out to be a complete fantasy skirmish rules system that will cater for the most eclectic miniatures collections known to mankind. It reckons it can cater for virtually any army size and race, chuck in a smattering of siege engines and magic, and it thinks it can do it all in 72 pages. Which it can. Only something doesn't feel quite right.

Battle Rage really is an unashamedly simple system which isn't afraid to do things its own way. Of course, dice and I'm-a-typical-Orc stats still reign supreme, but the turn system is as fluid as it gets. Initiative is up for grabs every round, and each model may move and execute one action. The players take turns moving one model at a time. X picks one and performs. Y picks one and responds. There are very few restrictions on what you can do here – it is the ultimate skirmish format. Unfortunately, it seems more suited to knock-about bar room brawls than units of gallant knights thundering into hordes of goblins.

The main problem is that this system is most suited to an anarchic game where a mêlée is already in full swing. Unfortunately, fantasy wargaming has its foundation in medieval conflict, which conjures up visions of large regiments manoeuvring for position across the battlefield before clashing in climatic set pieces. Unit coherency, or even units, are unknown in *Battle Rage*, so it tends to degenerate into every man for himself. Furthermore, the nature of the turn system imposes quite a severe limit on the number of participating troops, because you just can't remember who's done what.

VITAL INFO
A fantasy skirmish wargame
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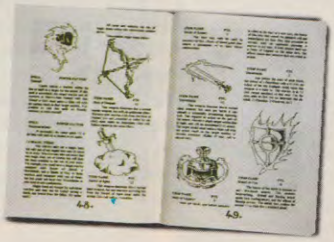

What *Battle Rage* does indeed provide is the flexibility to cover most of the main fantasy elements, however thinly. The culture system works reasonably well. It works like a sachet of flavouring in a bag of crisps, providing, from the same basic root, a vague tang of, say, a wild elf army, or a civilised army of intelligent reptiles. And the army lists have a reasonable stab at pointing you in the right direction.

However, although there are some refreshing ideas in *Battle Rage*, which are worth trying out, it won't keep your attention for long. There's little point in fleshing out the rules because battles are limited to a handful of models per side. Every element is cursory and simple to the extent that it's sadly uninspiring.

If you really want to get into wargaming you'll probably be prepared to take on something a bit more complicated, and if you don't then you definitely won't be exhilarated by this.

Mark Donald Score 5/10

running adventures and campaigns, and finishing with an expanded bestiary and a selection of spells for use in the game. In addition to all that, there's a GM's screen bound into the centre of the book, ready to be pulled out and used.

Campaign Chronicles is a definite improvement on the somewhat sparse *World of Aden* book, and contains a great deal of very useful and interesting advice. However, you can't help but think that most, if not all, of the information found here really should have been included in *The World of Aden*.

Still, if the setting sounds interesting to you, or you've already got *The World of Aden* and want to run something with it, this book will prove very useful indeed. So, despite its inadequacies, in that respect at least it's a success.

Andy Butcher Score 6/10

Constantinople by Night
A sourcebook for *Vampire: The Dark Ages*
£8.99
White Wolf
001 404 292 1819
Out now

Constantinople by Night

I haven't anticipated a sourcebook this much in years, and the latest release for *Vampire: The Dark Ages* lives up to all my expectations. This is a spectacular backdrop for adventure and intrigue – a powerful and beautiful city tainted by blood and pride, which is founded on a dream of eternity that is about to end in flames.

The format is the same as previous City sourcebooks but there is a completely different feel – less goth-punk and more plain gothic. Here the vampires are the heart and soul of the city, more powerful, more tortured and as bound up in religious mania and secular greed as the mortals they rule. The history, politics and geography of the city are all presented from the perspective of the Kindred who are themselves described in great depth. Kindred politics can often be restrictive, but here a whole chapter is spent detailing the various options open to PCs new to the city, and how they can interact with the warring factions.

Be warned that the emphasis is almost exclusively on the Kindred, and Storytellers will need to do background reading to bring the same depth to the mortal inhabitants. A full-length adventure would have rounded off the package perfectly rather than the slightly threadbare outlines given here.

Whereas the *Storyteller's Guide* was a little bland, *Dark Ages* finally comes into its own with this excellent supplement. Impressive in its ambition and epic sweep, this is a magnificent addition to the ongoing masterpiece that is the World of Darkness. While all you Storytellers race to the games shop, I need a long lie-down in a dark tomb to calm myself.

Mark Barter Score 9/10

Traxsis Volume 1

The first sourcebook for the *Leystorm: The Dominion* roleplaying system from UK company Rolefile Games, *Traxsis Volume 1* sets out to detail the world of the title, and the various factions and forces struggling for control of it. A second volume, due out later this year, will contain more info about the world.

Although it lies in the Inner Sectors of Dominion space, Traxsis has become a centre for the forces of the Resistance. Despite the romanticised stories told about the world, though, life on the planet itself is harsh and cruel. The planet was devastated when a huge Leygate was opened on the surface of the world in an experiment performed by the Guild Techpriests. When things went wrong, however, the resulting Leystorm ravaged the equatorial regions, leaving only the far north and south areas unaffected.

Today the world continues to be torn by the constant warfare between the Dominion forces which hold the north and the Resistance in the south. Caught between the two, the native Tribes eke out a precarious existence – although more and more of them are turning to the banner of the Resistance.

Traxsis Volume 1 concentrates on the Dominion and the Tribes, looking at important characters, and detailing everything from the current technology used by Dominion troops to the language of the Tribes. Following this come expanded rules for large-scale combat between immense Trackships, impregnable Warholds and more. Finally there's a selection of extra rules for the game, as well as some adventure ideas.

Traxsis Volume 1
A sourcebook for *Leystorm: The Dominion*
£8.99
Rolefile Games
01752 343382
Out now

As with *Leystorm*, *Traxsis* unfortunately suffers from some particularly uninspiring artwork. The material itself, though, is not at all bad – far from being the most original setting around, but equally far from being the worst. If *Leystorm* itself caught your fancy, you won't be disappointed with this.

Andy Butcher Score 6/10

GURPS Compendium II:

Combat and Campaigns

It might be for hardened *GURPS* players only, but nevertheless this volume does not impress.

Along with the previously released *GURPS Compendium I: Character Creation* (**arcane** 10), this tome comprises the next part of what is essentially the ultimate rules set for *GURPS Compendiums I & II* and *The Basic Rules*.

Like the first book, *Compendium II's* 192 pages reprint an eclectic collection of material from many of the *GURPS* worldbooks and sourcebooks, as well as some choice items from SJG's *Pyramid* and *Roleplayer* magazines. The mix material is a little more wide-ranging here, broken into several main chapters largely covering combat-related material. There are also reprints of some world-specific items, such as *GURPS Lensman's* nifty *Space Opera Combat System*, the mass combat system and its variants from *GURPS Japan, Horselands, Conan & Vikings* as well as some stuff from *GURPS Swashbucklers*, the latter few supplements being out of print.

VITAL INFO
A rules supplement for *GURPS*
£14.95
Steve Jackson Games
001 512 447 7866
Out now
sjg@io.com
http://www.io.com/sjgames/

The sections break down as follows – the Equipment chapter is a bit of a misnomer, covering heavy and mêlée/archaic weapons in detail but only skimming over firearms. Armour, computers, with a focus on hacking rules, and exotic technology are also highlighted, including some interesting material such as the 'enigmatic alien device button-pushing table'. The Combat chapter bleeds over into the Other Combat Systems and Mass Combat chapters. The systems here are basically super-advanced *GURPS* combat rules, with in-depth coverage that provides a four-page flowchart for fights, complete hit locations and tables galore.

Devoting three chapters to letting characters mangle each other does seem a little like overkill, and only the most dedicated referee and players will ever use the majority of these optional rulings. That said, the naval and space combat systems are a fine roleplaying alternative to the usual fudging or diversions into wargaming, and the land mass combat rules are good for running pocket wars in pre-World War II time periods. The Hazards and Hostile Environments chapter is a good addition, highlighting problems of locale that are often glossed over in many gameworlds, and this sensibly adjoins the expanded medical care/illness/fatigue/etc section. The largest disappointment in the book is the thinness of the Campaigning chapter. A few sage words on cinematic and high-powered gaming are bulked out with notes on alternate realities and societies. As a long-time referee of *GURPS* and several other roleplaying games, I personally had high hopes for this section and felt let down by its brevity.

Overall, then, *GURPS Compendium II* is sadly less than the sum of its parts and ends up being an awkward grab-bag of bits and pieces that fails to cover all the bases. If, as originally planned, the two *Compendium* books had been one volume, the better material might have balanced the weaker, but alone *Combat and Campaigns* struggles to work.

Steve Jackson Games has made the *Compendiums* official, and so the rules presented in them will no longer be reprinted in future *GURPS* supplements, which is slightly irritating. As with the first volume, this is for the serious *GURPS* gamer only.

Jim Swallow Score 4/10

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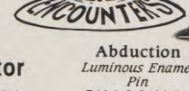

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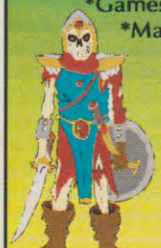

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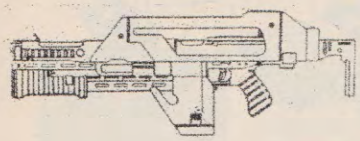

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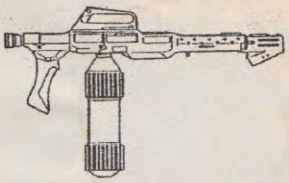

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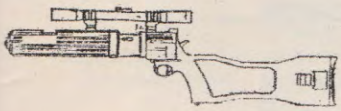

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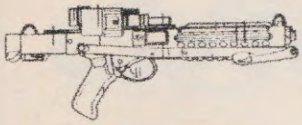

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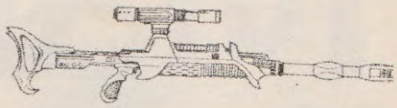

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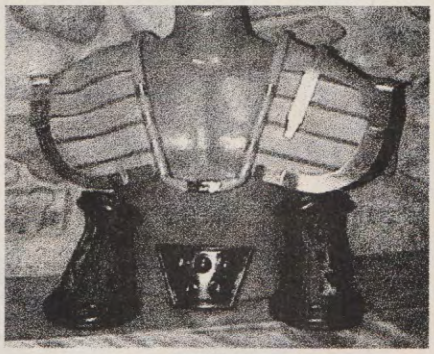

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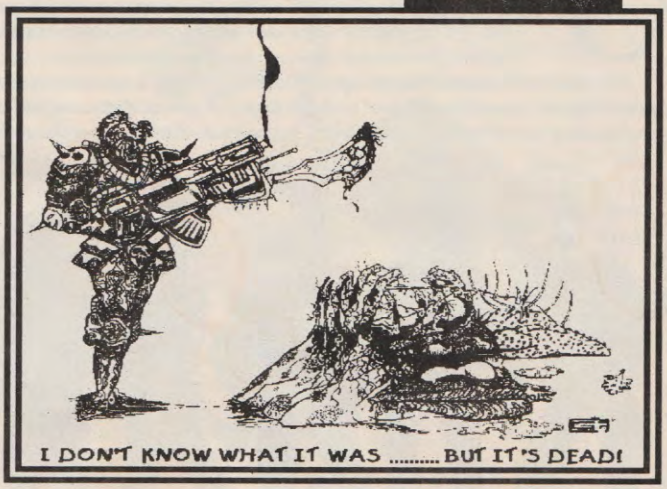

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THE GREAT LIBRARY

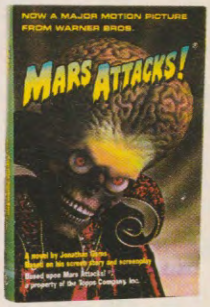
Movies Videos Comics Novels

Superheroes, martians, ants, and a promising new fantasy saga. This month sees the Great Library expanding its coverage from books and comics to include films and videos...

Mars Attacks

Does anyone remember the trading cards? We don't because we're not American and we weren't even alive in the 'fifties, but apparently they portrayed martians and dinosaurs eating America's cities. The comical little humanoids with an attitude problem now have their own film, in which they ray-gun indiscriminately.

With special effects by Industrial Light & Magic, the George Lucas company that did *Jurassic Park* and *Jumanji*, the film even manages to pull off several effective slapstick gags, including the old exploding green brains routine. Most of the verbal one-liners fall flat, but Jack Nicholson as the President doesn't disappoint, Tom Jones does a lot more than just sing *It's Not Unusual*, Sarah Jessica Parker is funny and Pierce Brosnan excels as the vain English scientist. But at less than 100 minutes, don't expect too much development – this is hack 'n' slash on film. When, eventually, the martians start getting their comeuppance, I was reminded of Winston Smith's experience in the early cinema scene in *1984*, but I ignored that thought and just sat back to enjoy the carnage. Any good campaign ideas? Sorry, no. But it may well make you want to shoot stuff at your next session.



Jonathan Palmer
Score 7/10

Movies

Produced by **Tim Burton** and **Larry Franco**
Directed by **Tim Burton**
Starring **Jack Nicholson** and **Glenn Close**
British release date 28th February

Johnny Mnemonic

Back when Steve Faragher was editor of **arcane**, we all went to see this film one afternoon at our local cinema. Opinion was unanimous, and summed up well by our art editor Maryanne's verdict – "Johnny Moronic more like".

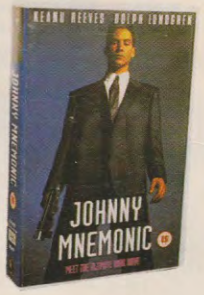
Seeing it again on video, I still agree. But I was expecting a lot less this time, and was prepared to offer Keanu Reeves some credit for his performance.

Maybe Reeves was simply getting behind a character who'd had large chunks of his long-term memory removed in order to accommodate a wet-wired brain implant containing 320 gigabytes – twice the chip's capacity – and was now suffering horribly from neural seepage as a result of the overload. Maybe. But even if that's not true, Dolph Lundgren's insane preacher is worth the rental price alone.

Videos

Though this is not a good film, the William Gibson connection alone makes it required cyberpunk viewing, and as the popularity of that genre increases, so will interest in *Johnny Mnemonic*.

Jonathan Palmer Score 4/10



Directed by **Robert Longo**
Distributed by **20th Century Fox**
Starring **Keanu Reeves** and **Dina Meyer**
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Wolverine: Unleashed

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Specially produced for the UK market, *Wolverine Unleashed* is a new title from Marvel Comics devoted to reprinting the solo adventures of one of the most popular superheroes of all time.

Ever since his first appearance in *Incredible Hulk 180 and 181*, Wolverine – also known as Logan and Patch – has been an incredibly successful character. His complex personality, coupled with a constant striving to better himself and a mysterious past, have combined to ensure his top spot in the Marvel world. This first issue contains a complete story set on the island of Madripor, one of Wolvie's favourite haunts when he's spending some time away from his X buddies. Berserker drugs, scheming crime bosses and fanatical Yakuza assassins all get a look-in, giving the short one more than enough opportunity to slash his way through several great fight scenes and spit out his characteristic one-liners.

Comics

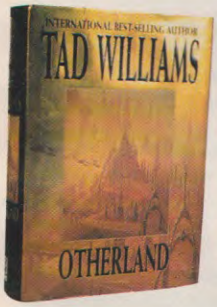
"If your pal's got a funny look in the eye, it's 'cause he's been starin' at that white light you see when all your brain cells explode!"

Grave Undertakings, *Wolverine Unleashed* #1

Later issues will reprint other tales, including the milestone *Weapon X*, which delved into Logan's past, and the mysterious government agency that gave him his admantium skeleton. This is great stuff, and is a definite 'must buy' for anyone unfortunate enough to have missed these stories the first time around.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Otherland: City of Golden Shadow



by **Tad Williams**

Published by Legend

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Tad Williams is best known for his fantasy trilogy, *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*. This is something of a departure from that work, being set in a cyberpunk near-future replete with high technology, social decay and a rather chilling global conspiracy.

The first volume in the *Otherland* saga gives no indication of just how many books Williams intends to write in the series, but based on the evidence here there will be at least two more installments to come in a story that revolves around the fantastical universe of the title.

"Then the creature reappeared, limbs flailing, dragging a small black square as though it were the anchor off a luxury liner."

Otherland is a place where dreams can become reality and any wish can come true, but it's under the control of The Grail Brotherhood, a group of incredible wealth and power that has lavished vast sums and the greatest geniuses of two generations on building it. Gaining entry isn't easy, and the masses have no idea of the existence of this strange new world – nor of the danger it poses.

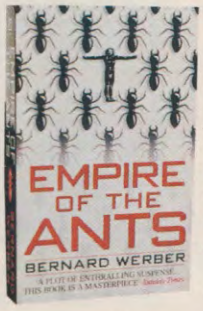
Novels

The heroine of the piece is Renie Sulaweyo, a teacher who has fought all her life simply to get by and provide for her alcoholic father and young brother in a future South Africa. When her brother slips into a mysterious and seemingly unaccountable coma, her frantic efforts to save him lead her to stumble on to some of the truth. In her struggle to survive she is aided by !Xabbu, a Bushman who has come to the city to learn what he needs to save his tribe.

City of Golden Shadow is an impressive work, skilfully interweaving many seemingly unrelated characters and plots into a cunningly-fashioned whole, and blending a gritty, cyberpunk edge with the dull mediocrity that is life for the masses, the fantastic world of Otherland, and the secretive machinations of the Grail Brotherhood. It's not an easy read, especially at the start when few of the pieces seem to fit together, but it is fascinating – and as the plot takes shape it becomes quite gripping. What's more, there's obviously plenty more to come.

Andy Butcher Score 8/10

Empire of the Ants



by **Bernard Werber**

Published by Corgi

Paperback £5.99

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Not to be confused with the hilarious 1977 disaster movie of the same name, this is a revolutionary, fascinating and, in turns, unsettling and entertaining science fiction novel. In fact, the only thing this does have in common with the film is lots and lots of ants.

This isn't just another traditional 'man versus nature' fable. We are allowed to follow and sympathise with the insects themselves, as well as the humans of a story which switches between the daily adventures of an ants' nest, and the adventures of a family who start disappearing in the basement of the house left to them by an uncle. Their lives on a collision course, the world view of both communities is changed forever.

"During the few seconds it takes to read this sentence, some 700 million ants will be born on Earth."

In a way similar to that of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, a series of lectures is intertwined with the story – this time about the life of the ant rather than the life of a buddha – in the form of entries from a journal written by the mysterious uncle of the story. The journal and story together give a clear, authoritative and empowering message warning that man is but one of two intelligent, complex and competing civilisations. If the novel has one lasting moral, it is this – ants were here a long time before us, and they will be here a long time after we are gone.

Novels

The story is certainly not unflawed – the antics of the ants and the humans occasionally seem far-fetched. But Werber, an experienced science writer and expert entomologist, leaves us with a feeling perhaps not of love, but certainly of respect for our tiny neighbours, and forces us to re-evaluate our relationships with nature in general.

Empire of the Ants is already a best-seller in more than 20 countries – 800,000 copies have been bought in Korea alone. Presumably the Koreans have contact with more full-on ants than we do, but this book is sure to become at least a cult classic over here too – maybe not for its literary quality, but certainly for its quirky, unique and valuable sense of perspective. Read it and you'll never pour petrol on an ants' nest again.

Gideon Kibblewhite Score 9/10

Stories Short

Here are some more sources of inspiration that didn't make it into the reviews section...

Aftermath – a novel of the future

by **Levar Burton**

Published by Warner

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Does the title of Geordi La Forge's first novel remind any roleplayers of an old favourite?

America's first black president is assassinated at the same time as an earthquake hits the heartland smack bang in the location 12s. Strife ensues, but good will have its day. Have you ever read *The Stand*?

Pawn of Chaos and For the Blood is the Life

Pawn of Chaos *edited by* **Edward E Kramer**

Published by White Wolf

Paperback $14.99 (£10 approx)

Out now

For the Blood is the Life *by* **F Marion Crawford**

Published by White Wolf

Paperback $5.99 (£3.99 approx)

Out now

White Wolf continues its efforts to break into literary publishing but distribution, in this country at least, isn't all it could be. You'll probably have to go to a specialist store to buy these books and the translation from the dollar price may vary, but, if you like Moorcock and Crawford, it's probably worth the effort. You'll get a new story by Moorcock in the former and eight classic ghost stories from the turn of the century in the latter, the cover of which says Lovecraft was a fan. Can't be bad.

The Psychotronic Video Guide

compiled by **Michael J Weldon**

Published by Titan

Large-format paperback £19.99

Out now

There are 3,000 reviews in this follow-up to Weldon's *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (Ballantine, 1983). There's advice on buying, and a list of people who will try to find even the most obscure titles for you, should your local shop let you down, which it probably will. Good reference material.

arcane scribblings

So, what do you think about arcane? Write in! It's not like we're telepaths, is it?

Dear arcane,
I would like to respond to January's letter of the month ('We all smell bad'): gamers do NOT smell bad. I am a member of a large society and there is not one man among its ranks who smells unpleasant (this is a major admission coming from the society's only woman).

As to there being so few female roleplayers and card gamers, that's because there are so few of us with the violent, ruthless and often insane mentality required by most RPGs.

Fiona (a.k.a. The Wench), e-mail

Not all gamers smell, agreed. The thing is, most games take place in confined spaces with closed windows – and it only takes a small number of the not-so-great unwashed to stink out the whole place.

If you think RPGs are too violent, ruthless and insane, next month we've got just the feature – see page 13.

Dear arcane,
I think Andy Butcher's article, 'Organising your Chaos', was excellent. I had just begun using my PC to do exactly what he suggests with my *Shadowrun* campaign. Great minds think alike. I do have two points to make, though.

First, in his round-up of hardware, Andy seems to focus on the latest systems. Top-range laptops are indeed expensive. But what do you actually need? A 486SX or even, at a push, a 386 is quite happy running *Windows 3.1* and appropriate desktop applications. More importantly, they're much, much cheaper.

Secondly, e-mail has another bonus in science fiction games, especially *Shadowrun/Cyberpunk*. If one of your players has an e-mail address, you can actually send them an 'anonymous' e-mail saying, "Meet me at Joe's Café, 9:30 tomorrow, or the kid gets it." You may want to warn them before sending odd e-mails like that, though.

James MacFarquhar, e-mail

Especially if they don't have sole use of a particular e-mail address...

Andy's article on computers won't be the last, you'll be glad to hear. We'll probably look at software in more depth next time – different things you can do with databases, spreadsheets and DTP, that sort of thing.

Dear arcane,
The one single thing that is missing from this magazine is fiction, and unfortunately that prevents it from being truly supreme. Sure, Gnome World's funny, but it's no match for a picaresque tale of adventure in a medieval world.

Surely you journalistic types know someone out there who can write short stories? Or even long ones – serials are a great way to lock in your readers.

Some of us just don't have the time to read those voluminous tomes that Robert Jordan and the like publish, but we still like a bit of escapist literature. So, bring on the storytellers!

Don't forget just how close writing adventures and writing stories are.

Steve Darlington, Australia

It's not like there's a shortage of books, though, is it? Or even a shortage of short stories?

If we stick a two-page story in the mag, something else – something that you couldn't get elsewhere – gets pushed out.

Dear arcane,
I am not experienced at RPGs, so I am not much of a PC. Although I have tried a few CCGs, I am not keen on PBMs, but I like *AD&D* in general. My favourite is *M:TG*, although I do find CCGs a tad complicated. I hear that FASA is doing a *Star Trek* RPG and I reckon TSR does great CD-ROM *AD&Ds*...

You have probably realised by now that I am a bit miffed about the use of abbreviations when you never explain what they mean. PC? something to do with people? Police Constable? Personal Computer? *AD&D?* Haven't a clue. Dungeons and Dragons? Always dark and dreary? CCG, something to do with cards, perhaps? Chronic card gamers? Compulsively crap game?

In future, I hope you will consider the less adept gamers and, every now and then, explain the jargon. Other than that, congratulations on a great magazine.

Thomas Young, Slough

IMHO we don't really have that much of a problem with TLAs. But maybe I should do a CFV and see if all players of a CCG or an RPG thinks it's OTT if we treat every newbie as a VIP? OTOH, maybe you're right.

Dear arcane,
I am writing in response to the complaints made against Andrew Rilstone. These comments were made by people who are so narrow minded that they will not accept another's opinion on roleplaying.

The point being made in his 'Starships and Stockbrokers' column was that it is good to try to play in different styles, and playing a mundane character can add realism to the challenge.

If you disagree, fine. Words are not meant to be followed to the letter. Yet they are original, imaginative ideas that could greatly enhance your game playing.

For instance, in *Red Dwarf*, the cast includes two chicken soup machine repair men and a lavatory droid. A more mundane cast would be hard to come by, yet they have all kinds of fascinating, hilarious adventures.

My point is that Andrew's ideas are very good, and should be tried out. I personally think the no-rules idea is poor, and without a set of mechanics a game will collapse, but I'll still give it a go.

I am currently running a *Shadowrun* campaign where the PCs are teachers and scientists. I am really enjoying it because I have never had so much realism in a game. Cheers Andrew.

Philip Whiston, Crewe

I don't know what all the fuss is about. Call of Cthulhu *is the most popular game among* arcane *readers – and what do we play in that? Professors of ancient history, vicars, doctors, dilettantes... Not exactly the Fantastic Four or Conan the Barbarian.*

Dear arcane,
Any tips on encouraging people to make a commitment to a game rather than turning up whenever they fancy, because it can become a nightmare trying to keep everyone happy? And any advice on running a club would be most helpful for me because I'm the treasurer.

Ben Ferguson, Brighton

Having the game on the same evening each week is a useful start, because players are more likely to plan other things around that date.

Advice on running a club? Maybe there's a feature in there...

Dear arcane,
Issue 14 was the first copy of your magazine I've bought and it's excellent. The reviews are very well written and tell

communication

If you'd like to get in touch with arcane *there are several ways. The most traditional is to send us a letter clearly marked* 'arcane *scribblings' and addressed to* arcane, *30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW. The slightly more technically advanced among you can send us a fax on (01225) 732252, while all you fully-fledged InfoCyberOtakuNauts out there can e-mail us at:*

arcane@futurenet.co.uk *or visit our Web site at:*

http://www.futurenet.co.uk/entertainment/arcane.html.

We look forward to hearing from you.

The book says...

Letter Of The MONTH

Dear arcane,

Andrew Rilstone's article ('Is it written?', **arcane** 14) was very nice, but it didn't deal with the difficulties of customising the rules of a game – especially at a convention. If I bring a character I built under the rules of a game to a con run and the referee has changed the rules, my character no longer does what I want it to. This spoils some of my fun – maybe a lot of my fun.

Now, what about an ongoing game? What if I've built a character using the rules and the referee doesn't know all of the rules? Then, somewhere along the way, he makes a house rule that ruins my character? What I'm trying to say is that although it's nice to run things free and loose, as a referee you have to be sensitive to your players' needs. As a con referee, you should always list it in the programme if your system is customised – 'System: *AD&D* variant,' for instance. I am a huge proponent of free-form gaming, but your players must know how you are making delineations. If they don't, they feel as though they're not standing on solid ground. This is almost always no fun. So, in the end, sure, do what's fun – and try new ways of doing things. But make sure your players are on the same page.

Anthony J Gallela, e-mail

True, the players need to know where they stand. In some game systems PCs can storm machine gun nests single-handed; in others, they'd be cut to bits in two yards. House rules might have similar drastic effects.

But characters are largely independent of rules. What the PCs can do may change a little; what they are stays pretty much the same. When I switched a Warhammer campaign to GURPS, things did get more realistic, and more dangerous – but the PCs were the same. The players weren't worried or affected by the switch. Maybe it was because none of them referred to their character as 'it'...

you what you really want to know about the games.

The 'On the Soapbox' article is totally true – there's nothing worse than putting loads of effort into a scenario when one of your players doesn't even bother to turn up.

The 'Opinion' article was a pretty interesting read, too. A friend of mine in Wales also runs a non-mythos game of *Call of Cthulhu* due to his religious beliefs, but it's still an amazing game. It's more eerie because most of the players know Lovecraft and the *Cthulhu* game inside out (myself included), and so there are some totally wacky antagonists in the game. Anyway, keep up the good work for 1997.

Jez Hunt, Newcastle

Glad you like the mag, Jez. Your comment about Cthulhu touches on an important point: that even if you do use Mythos monsters, the game works better if you don't use them all the time. Throwing the players a curve ball by way of a 'conventional' murder keeps them guessing.

Dear arcane,

I bought issues 13 and 14 at the same time. After reading the letters pages of 13, I immediately turned to 14 and was astonished to see that nobody (apparently) had replied to Jon Urch's letter on women in roleplaying. It's nice of him to try, but I think he's missed the target. He has fallen prey to an assumption which I think is much more damaging than the idea he denigrates, that "women don't use their imagination", which I heartily agree is rubbish.

The pivotal sentence is: "We should encourage more women to roleplay by playing games which appeal to their less violent nature."

Then what? Do the men go back to playing games suitable for them, while we girls play those deemed sufficiently free of gore to suit our delicate sensibilities? I know that's not what was envisaged, but whether he meant to or not, Jon implied it. Slapping a metaphorical 'suitable for women' sticker on some games risks limiting our involvement in the hobby as a whole. But it probably wouldn't work out that way because the whole idea is based on a questionable premise (next paragraph). **arcane**'s suggestion of getting women to come to ordinary game sessions hits much closer to home.

Now, about our 'less violent nature'. This is the assumption I meant. It is, I admit, a widely held belief. But it is unproven, and I for one think it is wrong. A historical note: in 16th century England, women were widely held to be much more sexually voracious than men, while in Victorian times, it was common knowledge among medical men that we took no pleasure at all in sex. I could go on – misconceptions about women have always been widespread. Whether it is true or not is beside the point. The point is that Jon accepts it as fact without the slightest hesitation, and goes on to use it as his basis for a course of action.

The issue for women in roleplaying is only a small part of a much wider problem within society. I know Jon's trying to help, but he comes across to me as ignorant and patronising. Such attitudes can do just as good a job of discouraging women as 'a certain faction of male roleplayers'. Better, in fact, as they're much more widespread. Physicians heal thyselves, then start on our hobby.

Kit Bathgate, Liverpool

Look, I'm a bloke, so I'm keeping my head below the parapet on this one. Have a look at the feature starting on page 49 instead.

Dear arcane,

Firstly, thank you for a superb gaming magazine, something that, in my humble opinion, we have not had since the days when *White Dwarf* printed articles about roleplaying in general. Personally, I would not object if, like the classic *WD* issues, you printed some system-specific scenarios and articles, as long as they were accompanied by some notes on how they could be adapted for use in other systems. I certainly would have no qualms about reading a scenario if the basic plot could be lifted out, or if I could just steal a couple of NPC ideas.

Particular thanks for including the wonderful *Star Trek: The Roleplaying Game* in your 'Retro' section. Although Phil Clare did neglect to mention that the Action Points system was perhaps a little heavy on the game mechanics to encourage roleplaying in its use, it was the first part of the system I changed.

Congratulations once more on a superb production.

Derek Johnston, Welwyn Garden City

***arcane** is never going to tie itself to two or three systems, as the early magazines were able to do. But I won't rule out including some stats for a range of games – for example, in issue 13's Encounter we could have included stats for Vampire and Cthulhu for the main NPCs; in Encounters issue 15 we could have done Traveller and GURPS. Whether or not we do this is dependent on the say-so of the games' manufacturers. And on whether you want us to.*

Dear arcane,

I appreciate that the foul threats of the MIB have placed you in fear for your lives, but I believe it is time for you to make a stand! You may have thought that it would stop at writing your name in bold, lower-case letters, but the MIB never stop when they have a foothold. Soon you will have to print your own names the same way, then the names of your correspondents, then the titles and eventually the articles themselves until... *[It gets worse – Ed].*

david dolliver (see?), Perthshire

Dave, sit down. Inhale slowly. Breathe out. Better?

arcane shorts

Here are some small, but perfectly-formed snippets from the rest of the month's mailbag.

To Pete from Kidderminster (issue 14): if the British army was to be equipped with Games Workshop weapons then, with a defence budget of, say, £20 billion, we could just about afford a squad of Gretchin, some green paint and a pack of shield stickers.

Duncan, Kidderminster

You'd save a lot of money on transportation, though – you could get your entire army to any conflict anywhere in the world for the price of a few stamps and a padded box.

Now that I am an information superhedgehog, I can finally offer you a card of the month. I think that it's great and have included it in my deck, ignoring those nitpickers who tell me it's just a rather sad fake stuck on to an old Anaba Shaman card.

David Goffin, Cleveland

It is indeed a very sad fake. What the hell is it, anyway?

Why don't you start running a small section at the back of your magazine with an A-Z of all the roleplaying games and supplements you have reviewed? It would be useful, for people like me who haven't been with **arcane** right from the start, to be able to see all the games at a glance.

Oh, and how do you rate *Middle-earth*?

Andrew James, Newcastle

We might, at that, although space is always at a premium.

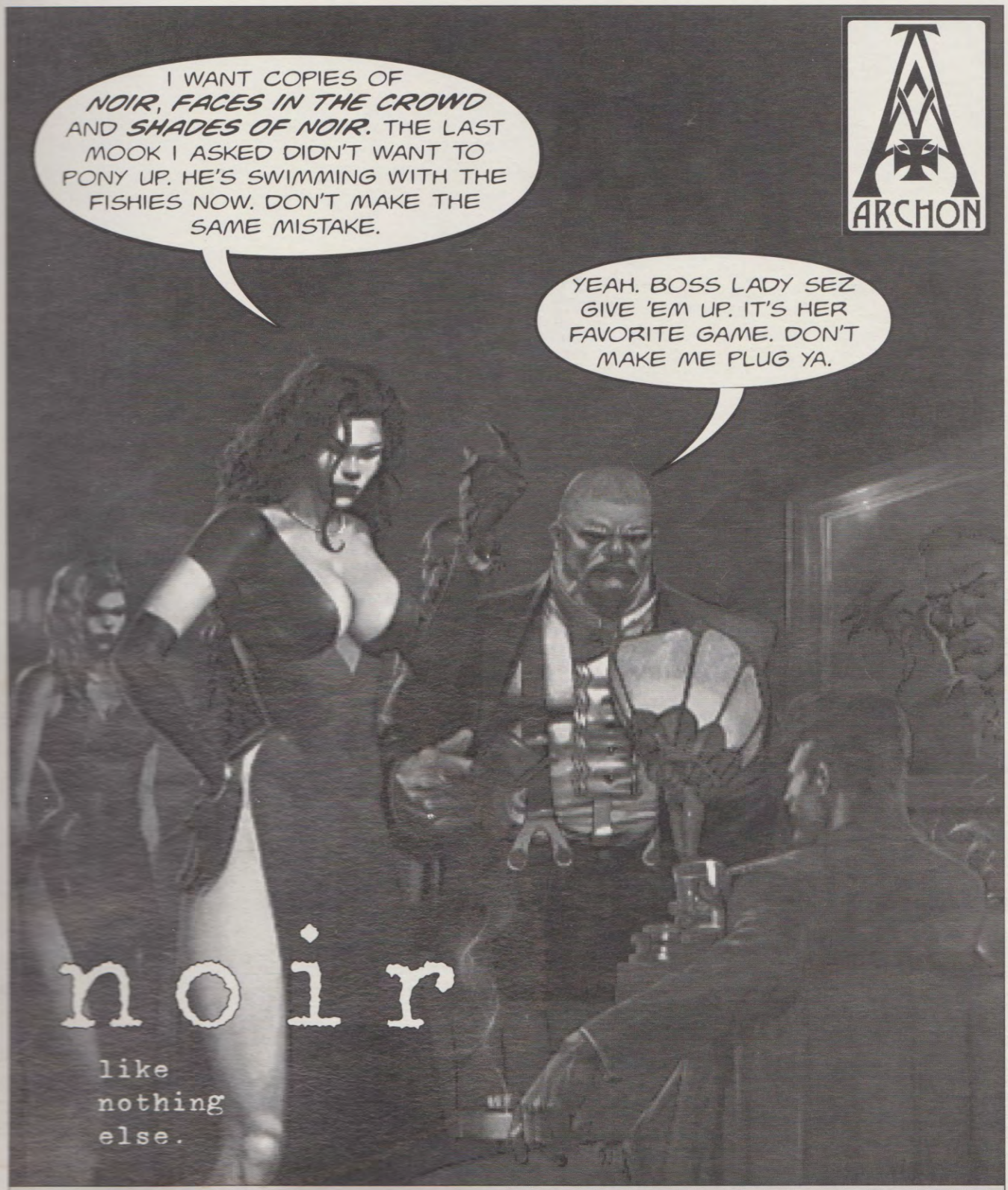
I'm not keen on MERP. Some of ICE's background stuff is fantastic – worth buying for anyone wanting to use Middle-earth as a setting. I just don't like the Rolemaster-style rules. I'd adapt Pendragon for a Middle-earth campaign.

The 'Up the Garden Path' article in the last issue of **arcane** really was the worst piece I think I have ever read in a professional roleplaying games magazine.

Ray Gillham, e-mail

You weren't keen, then?

Gnome World
DAI HARD
A TALE FROM GNOME WORLD
PART TWO
WRITERS: DAN ABNETT AND ANDY LANNING
ARTIST: ANDREW CURRIE
MY LORDS, LADIES AND LUGHSTIDE WASSAILERS! NOBODY MOVE AND NOBODY WILL GET HURT!
WHO ARE YOU? WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?
I AM NAZ GHOUL, LORD DELORIEN. AND THE MEANING . . .
". . . IS THAT YOU'RE ALL MY PRISONERS!"
STAIRS TO BELL-TOWER
BLISTERIN' BAGGINS! I GOTTA SAVE IVY!
CONSTABLE DAI HUGHES OF THE EAST SHIRE DIVISION HAD ONLY COME TO LORD DELORIEN'S CASTLE TO SEE HIS ESTRANGED WIFE IVY.
NOW HE WAS CAUGHT UP IN A MURDEROUS DARK ELF TERRORIST RAID.
BETTER SOUND THE ALARM BELL!
YOU'LL DO NO SUCH THING, YOU HALFLING SQUIT.
IS THAT RIGHT, BOYO?
SHORTLY . . .
KLANG! KLANG!
BAH! WHAT'S THAT RACKET?
SOUNDS LIKE THE TOWER BELL, NAZ!
LOREAL? WHAT THE STEAMING HELL IS GOING ON UP H-
OH.
NEXT: HALFLINGS CAN DAMAGE YOUR ELF


I WANT COPIES OF NOIR, FACES IN THE CROWD AND SHADES OF NOIR. THE LAST MOOK I ASKED DIDN'T WANT TO PONY UP. HE'S SWIMMING WITH THE FISHIES NOW. DON'T MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE.
YEAH. BOSS LADY SEZ GIVE 'EM UP. IT'S HER FAVORITE GAME. DON'T MAKE ME PLUG YA.
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